

*Religion and the
American Presidency*

*Edited by
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Chapter Two

Thomas Jefferson and the Myth of Separation

Thomas E. Buckley, S.J.

People interested in a popular or even academic discussion of religion and the presidency might consider Thomas Jefferson an easy subject. Everyone knows what he thought. In American public life, separation of church and state is a consecrated phase normally associated with the third president. Its modern usage dates from the *Everson* decision that extended the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to all the states. In that 1947 case, the U.S. Supreme Court split 5–4 in upholding a New Jersey law that reimbursed parents for the cost of transporting their children to parochial schools.¹ Writing for the majority, Justice Hugo Black presented a strict separationist interpretation of the Establishment Clause, but argued that the law was acceptable on the grounds of what would later be called the “child benefit theory.” The dissenting justices saw the New Jersey practice as an unconstitutional support for religion. What united the Court, however, was a common interpretation of the historical background of the Establishment Clause; and both sides relied principally upon selected writings of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and a history of the post-Revolutionary struggle for religious freedom in Virginia, which preceded the First Amendment by several years.²

According to Black’s perspective in *Everson*, religious liberty advanced steadily toward the strict separation of religion from government with Virginia providing “able leadership for the movement” toward the First Amendment. Virginians were convinced that freedom of religion “could be achieved best” when the state had no authority “to tax, to support, or otherwise to assist any or all religions, or to interfere with the beliefs of any religious individual or group.”³ The state endorsed this policy, Black asserted, by rejecting a proposal for a general assessment for religion after Madison wrote his famous “Memorial and Remonstrance” opposing such a tax, and then by enacting Jefferson’s statute for religious freedom in 1786. Forbidding

any sort of compulsion in matters of religion, this law offered the most iron clad guarantee of religious liberty in the new United States and became the principal antecedent of the First Amendment a few years later. Black also emphasized Jefferson's letter in 1802 to a group of Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut, in which the president opined that the Establishment Clause was intended to erect "a wall of separation between church and state."

Thus *Everson* endorsed the view that the First Amendment furnished "the same protection against governmental intrusion on religious liberty as the Virginia statute" and embraced Jefferson's "wall of separation" as the authoritative interpretation of the prohibition of an establishment of religion. "The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state," Black concluded. "That wall must be kept high and impregnable." Writing for the minority, Justice Wiley Rutledge thought that the Court's majority had not made the wall high enough, but he embraced Black's historical approach. "No provision of the Constitution," he wrote, "is more closely tied to or given content by its generating history than the religion clauses of the First Amendment."⁴ An elaborate and, in some details, more accurate account of the Virginia struggles over religious freedom forms the centerpiece of his argument against the New Jersey law.

Thus the Supreme Court stamped its judicial imprimatur upon a particular interpretation of America's past. According to this judicial perspective, Jefferson believed in a church-state separation that was absolute, total, and complete. The Court canonized the phrase he used in his letter to the Danbury Baptists as the ruling interpretation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, and popular thought and much scholarly opinion in courtroom and classroom embraced strict separation as the received doctrine on church-state relations.

Yet, in recent years, historians and political scientists have steadily chipped away at this construal of Jefferson's understanding of the place of religion in the Republic.⁵ Supreme Court justices also began to take another look. In a 1984 case involving a Christmas display in a public park, Chief Justice Warren Burger found Jefferson's "wall of separation" metaphor to be "useful" but not entirely "accurate" in describing the church-state relationship.⁶ The next year in a vigorous dissent from a school prayer decision, Justice William Rehnquist, who would soon succeed Burger, pushed historical revisionism even further when he insisted, "It is impossible to base sound constitutional doctrine upon a mistaken understanding of constitutional history. . . . The 'wall of separation between church and state' is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging.

It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.”⁷ Most recently, Philip Hamburger, in a study entitled *Separation of Church and State*, has pointed out that Jefferson’s “wall” metaphor only came into play in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸ What did Jefferson mean? What did he intend? To understand this extraordinarily complex man and how he understood the relationship between religion and the republic, we need to turn to the period when he personally was most responsible for leading that republic: his presidency.

This chapter examines the place of religion in his presidency in terms of two distinct aspects. First, his religiously oriented rhetoric—his public speeches, writing, and behavior during his presidency. In this respect, Jefferson’s famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association is but a single item among many to be considered. Whether intentional or not, Jefferson can be held more responsible for developing an American civil religion than any of his contemporaries. Second is his presidential policies and directives that lent direct government support to religion. Most notable was his use of religious missions for the purpose of “civilizing” the Native American population. Here too his contribution has important modern ramifications. He helped to establish a precedent for what today is called the faith-based initiative.

The Campaign of 1800

To discuss these elements adequately, we need the larger context provided by the bitter election campaign of 1800 that preceded Jefferson’s first term in office. That election, the first to elevate religion to a major issue nationally, focused on moral values and particularly on Jefferson’s fitness to be president.⁹ In the process, it afforded the intensely sensitive Virginian with the most painful and embarrassing moments of his political career. For the rest of his life Jefferson profoundly resented the extraordinary efforts that certain ministers in the New England and Mid-Atlantic States had made to prevent his election. These Federalist supporters of John Adams seized upon Jefferson’s published work, especially his *Statute of Religious Freedom* and his *Notes on the State of Virginia* to denounce him as an infidel determined to destroy the religious pillars of society. Their abusive treatment of him in pulpit and press during the summer and fall preceding the canvass of 1800 determined the place religion would occupy in his presidency.

From at least 1776 the Virginian had been an outspoken proponent of religious freedom, though often enough what he proposed as liberty

of conscience, conservative opponents had labeled as license. Shortly after independence was declared, the new commonwealth of Virginia had appointed Jefferson to a committee to prepare a complete revision of the colonial laws. In that capacity, he had composed a statute “for establishing religious freedom.” In place of “the church established by law” his proposed law would establish religious freedom. When first presented to the state legislature in 1779, the lawmakers postponed this radical measure. But in January 1786 after an extraordinarily heated petition campaign across the state, the General Assembly approved Jefferson’s proposal. Following an extraordinary preamble, which proclaimed that conscience rights were sacred and inviolable, the enacting clause offered the most sweeping guarantee of complete religious liberty made by any state at that time.¹⁰ But when its author became a candidate for president, his political enemies assailed this measure as the first step in a program to abolish “the Christian religion.”¹¹ Federalist Congressman William Loughton Smith of South Carolina anticipated many of their arguments in a 1796 pamphlet entitled *The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency Examined*.¹² In 1800 the clergy waded into the fray. In a lengthy pamphlet serialized in various Federalist newspapers, William Linn, the pastor of Philadelphia’s First Presbyterian Church, argued that Jefferson wanted “a government where the people have *no religious opinions and forms of worship*” (emphasis is in the original). His election would “destroy religion, introduce immorality, and loosen all the bonds of society.”¹³ In a Sunday sermon at nearby Christ Church, Episcopal minister James Abercrombie invited other ministers “to aid me in support of our great and common cause.” It would be a tragedy if “a Christian community” like the United States, should “*voluntarily . . . place at their head, as their ruler and guide, an acknowledged unbeliever, . . . an enemy to their faith.*”¹⁴

Abercrombie did not simply refer to the Statute. Instead, Jefferson’s remarks on religion in his *Notes on Virginia*, the only book he ever wrote, came back to haunt him. Composed while he was United States minister to France, after he had written the religious liberty statute but before the legislature approved it, his impassioned plea for its passage included the memorable lines: “It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”¹⁵ For such apparent indifference toward religion, critics called him an atheist and an “infidel” whose public policy would destroy “*all religion, order, and civil government.*”¹⁶ From their perspective, his years in France and his association with Voltaire and D’Alembert had fatally contaminated the Virginian.

He had not been inside a church for fourteen years, claimed Boston's *Columbiad Centinel*. What had complete religious freedom and the end of public support for religion done to the Old Dominion? The newspaper pointed to the result: "cock-fighting, horse-racing, gaming, debauchery, and profanity."¹⁷ Almost gleefully, the author of this series cited Bishop James Madison's fulminations against "immorality and vice" as evidence of the depths to which Jefferson's statute had dragged the state.¹⁸

Jefferson's friends and political allies fought back, of course. DeWitt Clinton and Samuel Knox each published a point-by-point rebuttal.¹⁹ One Republican writer referred to the clergy as "political pimps" who were "shamefully influencing elections."²⁰ And his good friend Benjamin Rush penned a consoling letter to Jefferson in early October agreeing with his desire "to keep religion and government independent of each other." "Were it possible," Rush added, "for St. Paul to rise from his grave at the present juncture, he would say to the Clergy who are now so active in settling the political affairs of the world, 'Cease from your political labors your kingdom is not of *this* world.'"²¹ But the charge of "atheism," leveled against him by Samuel Chase, an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court and rabid Federalist, stung the notoriously thin-skinned Jefferson.²² The sage of Monticello never quite got over that election.

Jefferson's Presidential Rhetoric

He would have his revenge on Chase and the New England clergy, but during his years in office he would also do everything possible to prove his critics wrong. Lacing his speeches and public writings with religious rhetoric, the new president strove to conciliate a nation seriously divided by the election. He sought common ground. His inaugural address made religious pluralism in the United States the paradigm for political pluralism. Just as Americans had "banished . . . religious intolerance" so also they must eliminate "a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions." In his statute, Jefferson had defined religion as "opinion" which could not be coerced without violating a person's natural rights. Now in his address he referred to the recent political campaign as a "contest of opinion." And he pointed out that "every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We are called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." Divergent theologies, church polities, and religious

perspectives were essentially unimportant. The United States possessed “a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter.” Denominational differences, whether religious or political were essentially unimportant. The new president ended with an appeal to “that Infinite power which rules the destinies of the universe [to] lead our councils to what is best, and given them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.”²³ That address turned the tide. As Benjamin Rush reported to an English friend, Jefferson had decisively refuted the allegation that he was “unfriendly to religion.”²⁴

Religious language worked in the public forum, and the third president returned to it repeatedly as an instrument to bind the nation together. Though his enemies continued to characterize his *Notes on Virginia* as “an instrument of infidelity,” Jefferson’s religious rhetoric effectively blunted their attack.²⁵ Was he simply being disingenuous? Consider his previous work. A belief in a providential God who is personally concerned for his creation permeates the documents he crafted for the colonies in revolt. “The god who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time,” he wrote in his *Summary View of the Rights of British America* two years before the Revolution. Both his draft for the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking up Arms and, more importantly, his Declaration of Independence affirms a faith in a Creator who personally guides and judges his creation.²⁶ These public statements find reinforcement in a section of his *Notes on Virginia* his clerical critics chose to ignore. Speaking of the evil of slavery, Jefferson commented, “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.” Jefferson took God seriously.²⁷

Moreover, Jefferson’s views on church and state were far more complex than some historians and judges have recognized. He was, after all, the author of the bill punishing “Sabbath breakers” as well as three other measures pertaining to church and religion, which had all been drafted at the same time as his religious freedom proposal. These included laws to guarantee the property of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, to appoint “Days of Public Fasting and Thanksgiving,” and to annul marriages “prohibited by the Levitical law.” As legal historian Daniel Dreisbach has cogently argued, taken together these measures

substantially refine the Jeffersonian model of church-state relations. In particular, the measures to protect Sabbath observance and provide days of state-sponsored prayer show Jefferson endorsing limited government activity in support of religion.²⁸

Those who would paint Jefferson as a strict separationist most often cite his Danbury letter. Early in 1802 Jefferson drafted his famous “wall of separation” letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. Though ostensibly a private document, he knew it would be quickly published in the press. The Baptists had written to congratulate him on his election and applaud his opposition to “the alliance between Church, and State, under the authority of the Constitution.” Such an alliance was precisely what they objected to in Connecticut. Jefferson responded, as he explained to his Attorney General Levi Lincoln of Massachusetts with one eye cocked on New England’s Federalist clergy, who had fought his election and still enjoyed a system of state tax support. He knew his Danbury letter would offend them, but he told Lincoln, “[T]he advocate of religious freedom is to expect neither peace nor forgiveness from them.”²⁹ On New Year’s Day, he had written to his son-in-law John Wayles Eppes that he hoped to win back “all the New England states . . . to their antiant [*sic*] principles, always excepting the real Monarchists and the Priests, who never can lose sight of the natural alliance between the crown & mitre.”³⁰

Jefferson had originally planned to use the Danbury letter to state his reason for not following the example of George Washington and John Adams in issuing proclamations of prayer and fasting. He postponed that explanation, however, until his second inaugural address.³¹ His position on the president’s proper responsibilities was integrally related to his conviction that the federal government’s powers were strictly limited. Writing to Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister at Princeton, the president explained his reasoning more fully in 1808. What was forbidden to the “general government” he wrote, “must rest with the states.” His predecessors had assumed that what was appropriate for the chief magistrate in a state was suitable for the president of the United States as well. Jefferson read the Constitution more strictly. It gave him only “civil powers,” and he had “no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.”³² He recognized the nation’s dependence upon God and invited his fellow citizens to prayer. He did not command it.

Nor did Jefferson erase religion from public discourse. Far from it. While expressing a hope that as president he could “strengthen . . . religious freedom,” Jefferson asserted that he did not desire a

“government without religion.” That change, he confided to a political ally, was a “lie” fostered by his enemies.³³ His annual messages to Congress repeatedly encouraged the belief that a providential God was watching over the country, keeping it out of European wars and blessing it with prosperity.³⁴ In his second inaugural address he returned again to a biblical event to describe the nation’s relationship with God. “I shall need, too,” he said,

the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land; and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life: who has covered our infancy with his providence and our riper years with his wisdom and power, and to whose goodness I ask you to join in supplication with me.³⁵

He had drawn upon the same biblical typology almost 30 years earlier in his proposal for the seal of the United States. As John Adams had explained to his wife in 1776, Jefferson wanted to place on one side of the seal “the Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night.”³⁶ He thought in terms designed to set the American experiment apart in the minds and hearts of his fellow citizens. In his rhetoric, the Exodus event in and through which God had formed his chosen people prefigured the formation of the American nation. The implications were obvious. Americans knew their Bible history. George Washington and John Adams in their inaugural addresses had invoked God’s Providence, but neither of them identified America as a new type of Israel, or Americans as a people specially chosen. In this respect, Jefferson played a definitive role in the formulation of an American civil religion. What he personally believed or thought is beside the point. He understood the necessity of binding a disparate nation together. As the country’s chief executive in Washington, he further developed ideas and themes present in his previous careers in Williamsburg, Richmond, and Philadelphia. Taken together his religious perspective, as publicly expressed, recognized God’s providential design at work in the history of the United States, committed the new nation to religious freedom, and fostered a sense that the country had been specially chosen by God.

Public Policy

While Jefferson spoke publicly about the benefits of religion to his fellow citizens, he also gave them an example. As James Hutson has pointed out, the sage of Monticello was the master of symbolic gestures. During his presidency, he regularly attended church services in

the chamber of the House of Representatives. Though he had first joined the Episcopal congregation in the District of Columbia, the Capital was not only more convenient, it was also a more public venue in which to appear and the services led by a variety of ministers were nondenominational in character. By his regular presence at public worship, Jefferson made it clear that his “wall of separation” did not keep him out of church.

Nor did it inhibit the president from facilitating the free exercise of religion for people in the District of Columbia. While the legislative branch provided the religious setting, the executive branch supplied the Marine Band for the instrumental music to accompany the singing. Moreover, Jefferson also permitted particular religious groups such as the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians to worship in government buildings. Individual congregations held communion services in the Treasury building and the offices of the War Department. As Hutson concludes, “on Sundays in Washington during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, the state became the church.”³⁷

Moreover, his administration openly fostered Christianity among the Native Americans. In a message to the chiefs of various Indians tribes, Jefferson urged them to accept “the will of the Great Spirit to which we must all submit.”³⁸ Those who look for historic justification for the faith-based initiative can—for better or worse—look back to Jefferson’s record. He openly supported what had been the policy of his Federalist predecessors, Washington and Adams, in helping to fund Christian missionaries, Protestant and Catholic, in their efforts to convert (and thereby civilize) the Native American population. Despite Secretary of State Madison’s concern that the president might be violating “the exemption of Religion from civil power,” Jefferson endorsed a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians that provided \$300 to build a church and \$100 annually for 7 years to maintain a Catholic priest “to perform . . . the duties of his office” as well as serve as school teacher. 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.³⁹

Religious freedom, much more than separation, was Jefferson’s guiding principle. In this respect, his “wall of separation” remarks to the Danbury Baptist Association were out of character with the official face that he maintained as president not only toward religion but also toward the churches. The phrase can only be understood in light of its larger context: the bitter residue left by the politicization of Federalist clergy during the campaign of 1800 and his belief that

religion should be free from the coercion of state taxation employed in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Elevating the “wall of separation” metaphor into a definite statement of Jeffersonian belief about the relationship between church and state served the purpose of others after him much more than it reflected his settled opinion. Indeed, it created a myth about Jefferson’s views of the relationship between religion and government that too many Americans have uncritically accepted.

Notes

1. *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 3 (1947). Before *Everson*, the Establishment Clause only applied to the federal government, but in 1947 the Supreme Court used the Fourteenth Amendment to nationalize the Establishment Clause as it had done for the Free Exercise Clause in 1940.
2. In taking this path, the Court broke no new ground. In an 1878 case involving polygamy among the Mormons in Utah Territory, Chief Justice Morrison Waite had emphasized Virginia’s experience and Madison’s and Jefferson’s views as normative for interpreting the First Amendment (*Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 164 [1878]).
3. *Everson*, 330 U.S. at 11. For the context of the *Everson* case, Black’s personal background, and his role in the decision, see Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 422–434, 454–478.
4. *Everson*, 330 U.S. at 13, 18, and 33.
5. Among the multiple studies that have contributed to this development, see especially Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church and State* (New York, 2002).
6. *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984) at 1359.
7. *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) at 107. For an evaluation of the significance of Rehnquist’s opinions, see Derek Davis, *Original Intent: Chief Justice Rehnquist and the Course of American Church/State Relations* (Buffalo, NY, 1991).
8. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 259–260.
9. Studies of this campaign include Charles F. O’Brien, “The Religious Issue in the Election of 1800,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 107 (1971): 82–93; and Constance Bartlett Schulz, “Of Bigotry in Politics and Religion: Jefferson’s Religion, the Federalist Press, and the Syllabus,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 91 (1983): 73–91.
10. Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787* (Charlottesville, VA, 1977).
11. “Caius,” in the *Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*, August 4, 1800. The next step, according to “Caius” (*Federal Gazette and*

Baltimore Daily Advertiser, August 12, 1800) was the 1799 Virginia law revoking previous assemblies' guarantees of the Protestant Episcopal Church's right to its property.

12. William Loughton Smith, *The pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency examined: And the charges against John Adams refuted: Addressed to the citizens of America in general, and particularly to the electors of the president* (United States, 1796), 36–40.
13. "Serious Considerations on the Election of a President," *The Connecticut Courant* [Hartford], September 8, 1800.
14. Emphasis is in the original. *Gazette of the United States and Daily Advertiser* [Philadelphia], August 30, 1800.
15. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, NC, 1955), 159.
16. Emphasis is in the original. "The Jeffersoniad, No. III," *Columbiad Centinel* [Boston], July 5, 1800.
17. "The Jeffersoniad, No. IV," *Columbiad Centinel* [Boston], July 9, 1800.
18. "The Jeffersoniad, No. XI," *Columbiad Centinel* [Boston], August 20, 1800. Bishop Madison of Virginia was a cousin of the other James Madison and a good friend of Jefferson's.
19. [DeWitt Clinton], *A vindication of Thomas Jefferson; against the charges contained in a pamphlet entitled, "Serious considerations etc"* (New York, 1800); and [Samuel Knox], *A vindication of the religion of Mr. Jefferson . . . By a friend to real religion* (Baltimore, 1800).
20. *American Mercury* [Hartford], October 2, 1800.
21. Emphasis is in the original. Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, October 6, 1800, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 1, reel 22 (microfilm), Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
22. Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, May 26, 1800, abstract of a letter, transcript, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 3, reel 4 (microfilm), University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. As president in 1804 Jefferson encouraged Chase's impeachment, which failed in the Senate.
23. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Inaugural Addresses of President Thomas Jefferson, 1801 and 1805* (Columbia, MO, 2001), 4, 5, 6.
24. Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp, March 31, 1801, in John A. Woods, ed., "The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp 1773–1809," *Journal of American Studies*, 1 (1967): 34.
25. C[lement] C[arke] Moore, *Observations upon certain passages in Mr. Jefferson's Notes on Virginia, which appear to have a tendency to subvert religion, and establish a false philosophy* (New York, 1804), 29.
26. Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, NJ, 1960–), 1: 135. For an elaboration of this theme, see Thomas E. Buckley, S.J., "The Political Theology of Thomas Jefferson," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan (Cambridge and New York, 1988), 75–109.
27. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 163.

28. Boyd, ed., *Jefferson's Papers*, 2: 553–558; Daniel L. Dreisbach, “A New Perspective on Jefferson’s Views on Church-State Relations: The Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom in its Legislative Context,” *American Journal of Legal History*, 35 (1991): 172–202.
29. Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1904–1905), 8: 129. See also Daniel L. Dreisbach, “‘Sowing Useful Truths and Principles’: The Danbury Baptists, Thomas Jefferson, and the ‘Wall of Separation,’” *Journal of Church and State*, 39 (1997): 455–501.
30. Thomas Jefferson to J[ohn] W[ayles] Eppes, January 1, 1802, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 3, reel 5 (microfilm), University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
31. Cunningham, *Inaugural Addresses of President Thomas Jefferson*, 77.
32. Ford, ed., *Works of Jefferson*, 9: 175, 176.
33. Thomas Jefferson to John Bacon, April 30, 1802; and Jefferson to DeWitt Clinton, May 27, 1807, in Ford, ed., *Works of Jefferson*, 8: 229; 9: 63.
34. Thomas Jefferson, “First Annual Message,” December 8, 1801; “Second Annual Message,” December 15, 1802; “Third Annual Message,” October 17, 1803; “Fifth Annual Message,” December 8, 1805; and “Eight Annual Message,” November 8, 1808, in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York, 1897), 1: 314, 330, 349, 371, 444.
35. Cunningham, *Inaugural Addresses of President Thomas Jefferson*, 79.
36. John Adams to Abigail Adams, August 14, 1776, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA, 1963), 2: 96.
37. James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1998), 84–96, quote on 91. Hutson notes that Jefferson contributed liberally to the construction of at least ten churches and chapels of various denominations in the District of Columbia, Georgetown, and Alexandria (*Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, 85, 94–96).
38. Thomas Jefferson to Chiefs of Indian Tribes, April 11, 1806, transcript, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 3, reel 4 (microfilm), University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.
39. [Madison to Jefferson], in Message to Congress of 17 October 1803, Thomas Jefferson Papers, series 1, reel 29 (microfilm), Library of Congress; U.S. Government, *A Compilation of All the Treaties between the United States Government and the Indian Tribes Now in Force as Laws* (Washington, DC, 1873), 425; and Dorothy C. Bass, “Gideon Blackburn’s Mission to the Cherokees: Christianization and Civilization,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1974): 203–226. For very different perspectives on Jefferson, the missionaries, and the Indians, see William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

Chapter Three

Religion in the Life, Thought, and Presidency of James Madison

Vincent Phillip Muñoz

Was James Madison a Christian? Was his political thought grounded upon traditional religious faith? Did he seek—to borrow a phrase from Thomas Jefferson—to erect “a wall of separation” between church and state? This chapter addresses these questions through a close examination of some of Madison’s writings and presidential actions. It begins with a discussion of the role of religion in Madison’s life and thought. It then proceeds to examine Madison’s view of the proper role of religion in American public life.

Religion in Madison’s Life and Thought

Madison’s Religious Beliefs

The nature of James Madison’s religious beliefs has long confounded scholars. Some find his writings to reflect God-fearing Christianity. His major nineteenth-century biographer William C. Rives, for example, claims that on “Christian doctrinal points” Madison is a model of “orthodoxy and persuasion.”¹ More recently, Garrett Ward Sheldon has written that Madison “operated from a Christian perspective and commitment.”² The prolific author Michael Novak asserts that “there can be no doubt that his [Madison’s] world view is no other than Christian. . . . [W]hile it does not affirm everything that orthodox Christian faith affirms, Madison’s vision is sufficiently impregnated with Christian faith to be not only unconvincing, but *unintelligible* without it.”³

Other scholars disagree. Irving Brant, Madison’s major twentieth-century biographer, concludes that Madison adopted “a quiet unorthodoxy differing more in manner than in matter from the

housetop-shouted heretical deism of Jefferson.”⁴ John West, Jr., finds it decisive that “Madison in his later years expressed very little personal interest in religion.”⁵ “Given Madison’s adult indifference to religion,” West continues, “he, more than any other major Founder, was the forerunner of the modern secularist.”⁶

Some scholars try to split the difference. According to Lance Banning, Madison’s “mature [religious] opinions are a matter for conjecture.”⁷ Madison biographer Ralph Ketcham suggests, “It seems clear he [Madison] neither embraced fervently nor rejected utterly the Christian base of his education. He accepted its tenets generally and formed his outlook on life within its world view.”⁸

The disagreement over Madison’s personal faith results, in part, from the fact that after 1776 Madison wrote almost nothing about his religious convictions—in the words of William Lee Miller, “he kept his mouth shut” about his religious beliefs.⁹ All we know for certain are basic facts pertaining to Madison’s religious life. His father was a vestryman in the established Anglican Church; his mother was a devout Anglican. Madison’s parents had him baptized in the Church of England. He received much of his primary education from his paternal grandmother, who was remembered as a pious Christian woman and an intellectual.¹⁰ At age 12, Madison was sent to a boarding school run by the Scottish minister Rev. Donald Robertson. After four years, he returned home and continued his education under Rev. Thomas Martin, who was also a Scotsman. Madison then attended Princeton College, passing examinations in English, Latin, Greek, and New Testament Bible. At Princeton, where according to Mark Noll “religious considerations were always central to the working out of republican theory,”¹¹ Madison was mentored by Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon, an archetypical Scots Presbyterian Calvinist.¹² After finishing his college requirements in two years, Madison completed six months of graduate studies, which included work in Hebrew and theology. He and Dolly were married by an Episcopal priest in an Episcopalian ceremony. Madison preferred Episcopalian services his entire life, yet he never entered full communion or identified himself as an Episcopalian.¹³ According to Librarian of Congress James Hutson, Madison was not conscientious about attending church services while away from home serving in Congress in the 1780s and 1790s, but as president, he followed Jefferson’s practice of worshipping at a local congregation and in the hall at the House of Representatives.¹⁴ At the end of his life, Madison was buried according to the Book of Common Prayer.¹⁵

Speculation about Madison’s faith—and it is important to emphasize that all we can do is speculate—necessarily must center on the few

revealing personal statements Madison made. His youthful correspondence with his good friend and Princeton classmate William Bradford suggests that the young Madison believed in an afterlife and was favorably disposed toward religious faith. “Yet however nice and cautious we may be in detecting the follies of mankind and frame our Oeconomy [*sic*] according to the precepts of Wisdom and Religion,” Madison wrote in late 1772,

I fancy there will commonly remain with us some latent expectation of obtaining more than ordinary Happiness and prosperity till we feel the convincing argument of actual disappointment. Tho [*sic*] I will not determine whether we shall be much the worse for it if we do not allow it to intercept our views towards a future State, because strong desires and great Hopes instigate us to arduous enterprises fortitude and perseverance. Nevertheless a watchful eye must be kept on ourselves lest while we are building ideal monuments of Renown and Bliss here we neglect to have our names enrolled in the annals of Heaven.¹⁶

Upon learning that his friend had chosen not to enter religious ministry, Madison composed the following seemingly faithful response:

I cannot however suppress this much of my advice on that head that you would always keep the Ministry obliquely in View whatever your profession be. This will lead you to cultivate an acquaintance occasionally with the most sublime of all Sciences and will qualify you for a change of public character if you should hereafter desire it. I have sometimes thought there could be no stronger testimony in favor of Religion or against temporal Enjoyments even the most rational and manly than for men who occupy the most honorable and gainful departments and are rising in reputation and wealth, publicly to declare their unsatisfactoriness by becoming fervent Advocates in the cause of Christ, & I wish you may give in your Evidence in this way. Such instances have seldom occurred, therefore they would be more striking and would be instead of a “Cloud of Witnesses.”¹⁷

Such statements disappear from Madison’s writings after 1776. Whether he maintained his belief in an afterlife beyond his youth he does not say (although, as we shall discuss below, the argument of his famous “Memorial and Remonstrance” written in 1785 depends on it).

Brief passages from private letters written toward the end of Madison’s life seem to reveal a more detached, philosophical disposition that appears to neither affirm nor deny the existence of God or an afterlife. Of these letters, perhaps the most revealing is Madison’s response to Frederick Beasley, dated November 20, 1825. Beasley,

a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, had written to Madison requesting his opinion on a pamphlet titled *Vindication of the Argument a prior in Proof of the Being and Attributes of God, from the Objection of D^r. Waterland*. Madison's response included the following:

DEAR SIR I have duly rec^d the copy of your little tract on the proofs of the Being & Attributes of God. To do full justice to it, would require not only a more critical attention than I have been able to bestow on it, but a resort to the celebrated work of Dr. Clarke, which I read fifty years ago only, and to that of D^r. Waterland also which I never read. . . .

The finiteness of the human understanding betrays itself on all subjects, but more especially when it contemplates such as involves infinity. What may safely be said seems to be, that the infinity of time & space forces itself on our conception, a limitation of either being inconceivable; that the mind prefers at once the idea of a self-existing cause to that of an infinite series of cause & effect, which augments, instead of avoiding the difficulty; and that it finds more facility in assenting to the self-existence of an invisible cause possessing infinite power, wisdom & goodness, than to the self-existence of the universe, visibly destitute of those attributes, and which may be the effect of them. In this comparative facility of conception & belief, all philosophical Reasoning on the subject must terminate.¹⁸

Madison posits that philosophical reasoning can deduce two possible alternatives to explain the cause of existence: an invisible self-caused cause that itself is the cause of all that exists or, alternatively, the infinite self-existence of the universe. The mind, he says, "prefers at once" the former. It "finds more facility" in assenting to belief in an invisible cause possessing "infinite power, wisdom, and goodness" than it does to the self-existence of the universe without such attributes.

But why? Why, we might ask, does *the mind* prefer the self-existing cause possessing infinite power, wisdom, and goodness? It is not difficult to understand why we might emotionally or spiritually embrace the conclusion most compatible with a creator god, but as a matter of strict philosophical reasoning, does Madison suggest that the self-existing cause is more intellectually sound than belief in an infinite series of cause and effect?

Madison says the possibility of an infinite series of cause and effect "augments, instead of avoid[s] the difficulty." Perhaps Madison means to suggest that belief in the eternal existence of the universe with an infinite series of cause and effect fails to offer a satisfactory resolution to the question of how existence itself came into being

since our finite minds struggle to contemplate infinity. If this is correct, then it is the finiteness of our minds that leads it to prefer belief in an invisible self-caused cause over the eternal existence of the world—that is, Madison does not claim that reason itself sides with belief in an invisible cause possessing infinite power, wisdom, and goodness over belief in the eternal existence of the world. This conclusion would seem to be confirmed by Madison’s statement that “in this comparative facility of conception & belief, all philosophical Reasoning must terminate.” Madison suggests that philosophical reasoning alone cannot arbitrate between the possibility of the eternity of the world and the existence of a self-caused cause. In short, Madison’s position seems to be that reason suggests the possibility of but does not confirm the existence of a creator god possessing infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

Strikingly, we do not find in Madison’s writings an explicit appeal to Scripture. We have copies of the notes Madison took from his study of the Bible as a young man, but as far as I can tell, Madison never cites Scripture to resolve questions pertaining to the existence or nature of God.¹⁹ In *Federalist* 37, moreover, Madison seems to question the certainty with which man can apprehend the meaning of divine revelation:

When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it may be, is rendered dim and doubtful by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated.²⁰

On theological matters, Madison was first and foremost a rationalist. The starting point (and perhaps the end point) of his reflections seems to have been unaided philosophical reasoning—not so much reason aided by faith but human reason simply. In the aforementioned response to Beasley, Madison also states,

But whatever effect may be produced on some minds by the more abstract train of ideas which you so strongly support, it will probably always be found that the course of reasoning from the effect to the cause, “from Nature to Nature’s God,” Will be the more universal & more persuasive application.²¹

Madison seems to reveal the type of reasoning that he himself found most persuasive—“from Nature to Nature’s God.”

Did Madison’s philosophical speculations, then, ultimately lead him to embrace religious faith? The evidence from Madison’s personal writings does not lead to a definitive conclusion. Madison’s natural

theology suggests that he was not an atheist—he never intimates that reason disproves God’s existence—yet it also does not definitively confirm a firm belief in the precepts of Christianity or in any sectarian religious faith.

Madison’s Theology of Religious Freedom

Regardless of his personal views, Madison embraced theological assumptions in his public arguments. The “Memorial and Remonstrance,” his most developed articulation and defense of the right to religious liberty, assumes a fundamental theological starting point.²²

The “Memorial” begins with the premise “ ‘that Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the Manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence,’ ” language Madison borrowed from Article 16 of the Virginia Declaration of Rights.²³ It then continues: “The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate.” Madison does not defend this particular understanding of religious obligation. He does not explain why religion can be directed only by reason and conviction. He takes these theological premises as given.

The Memorial’s argument that a “Creator” exists and that He is attentive to our interior beliefs (our “conviction and conscience”). It assumes, moreover, that men owe this providential deity a particular sort of “homage”: our religious duties must be “directed by reason and conviction” in accordance with our “conviction and conscience.” The God presumed by the “Memorial and Remonstrance” favors only free and voluntary worship that reflects the individual’s interior conviction; He does not recognize religious duties discharged on account of force or violence. The “Memorial” does not specify the particular forms of worship God requires (if such forms exist), but it does claim that whatever they may be, the individual himself must believe that they are acceptable to God. If God requires specific rituals or actions, they must be performed with sincere belief to be salutary. In the “Memorial’s” theology, faith is primary; an individual conceivably could achieve salvation with faith alone, but he could not with acts absent faith.²⁴

The “Memorial’s” focus on the individual conscience necessarily implies that salvation is granted to individuals as such. The argument assumes that God does not save nations, communities, or territories, and that He does not reward particular peoples or traditions as such. Memorial’s god must grant salvation to individuals as such because it posits that the sincerity of an individual’s beliefs is essential in the economy of salvation. Madison’s God, moreover, does not allow one individual to meet the religious obligations of another. Proselytizing can only take the form of persuasion. Insofar as law fails to speak to interior conviction, the coercive force of law cannot lead men to salvation. Lawgivers, accordingly, are all but impotent in such matters. Because “it is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage, and only such, as he believes to be acceptable to him,” citizens cannot have a duty to render homage deemed appropriate by those who possess political power. Scripture might say, “Let every person be subject to the government authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God,”²⁵ but according to the “Memorial,” political rulers possess no special authority to determine religious obligations.

The “Memorial” in fact denies that God establishes specific political authorities or that He enforces religious obligations through them. Political authorities “are but the creatures and vicegerents” of society at large (Article 2). If men abuse their natural freedom and fail to meet their religious duties, “it is an offence against God, not against man” (Article 2). Our failure to perform our religious obligations cannot offend the authority of other men because no man has been given authority by God to enforce religious obligations.

Given this theology, one might easily agree with Lance Banning that “the ‘Memorial’ was obviously written from a Christian point of view.”²⁶ Precision demands, however, that all we say with certainty is that Madison’s argument for religious freedom adopts a theology compatible with many forms of Protestant Christianity. This reservation accounts for the possibility that Madison may have believed his argument was grounded upon natural theology alone. We must also consider that Madison wrote the “Memorial” in the midst of a fierce battle over Patrick Henry’s proposed general religious establishment bill. His first (though certainly not his only) intention was to persuade a late eighteenth-century Protestant audience. Although the political context is not decisive in itself, it should not surprise us that Madison employed arguments that appealed to his immediate audience.²⁷

Madison's View of the Role of Religion in American Public Life

Madison's Criticism of Government Support of Religion

Given his lack of revealing statements and the nature of his theology, Madison's personal religious beliefs are bound to remain elusive. That is not the case regarding his views on the role of religion in American public life. Madison articulates a clearly developed position on the proper relationship between church and state.

The dominant scholarly opinion, especially among those concerned with First Amendment religious jurisprudence, is that Madison championed Thomas Jefferson's "wall of separation." This interpretation was planted in the public mind by the Supreme Court in its first modern-day Establishment Clause case, *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947). After invoking Madison and Jefferson as the individuals most responsible for the existence and meaning of the First Amendment, the *Everson* Court stated:

The "establishment of religion" clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. . . . No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever from they may adopt to teach or practice religion. . . . In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect "a wall of separation between Church and State."²⁸

In his *Everson* opinion, Justice Rutledge claimed, "Madison opposed every form and degree of official relation between religion and civil authority,"²⁹ an interpretation that received authoritative support four years later by Irving Brant, Madison's distinguished biographer. According to Brant, freedom of religion was for Madison "the fundamental item upon which all other forms of civil liberty depended," and the fundamental requirement for religious freedom "was the total separation between government and religion."³⁰ Today the strict separationist interpretation of Madison is championed by Supreme Court Justice David Souter.³¹

I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere that strict separationism misinterprets Madison's thought.³² Madison did write that the

taxpayer-funded legislative chaplain instituted by the First Congress was a “palpable violation” of constitutional principles and that religious proclamations by the president were “shoots from the same root.” Madison even went so far as to identify a prohibition on taxpayer-funded chaplains for navy crewmen insulated at sea as “the consequence of a right principle.”³³ But Madison thought these matters violated constitutional principles because they required the state to take cognizance of religion as such. He objected to the government legislating on religious matters as such, not—as strict separationists think—to government policies that aid religion. Strict separationists overlook the fact that Madison also opposed government policies that penalized individuals on account of religion. Madison, for example, criticized Jefferson’s proposed constitution for Virginia because it excluded religious ministers from the state legislature:

EXCLUSIONS. Does not the exclusion of Ministers of the Gospel as such violate a fundamental principle of liberty by punishing a religious profession with the privation of a civil right? does it [not] violate another article of the plan itself which exempts religion from the cognizance of Civil power? does it not violate justice by at once taking away a right and prohibiting compensation for it? does it not in fine violate impartiality by shutting the door against the Ministers of Religion and leaving it open for those of every other?³⁴

Madison sought to prevent the government from either privileging or penalizing religion as such. Strict separationists capture only half of Madison because they mistake a consequence of his principle for the principle itself, thus distorting his true position. Madison did not favor the exclusion of religion from the public square.

To some extent, the strict separationist misinterpretation is understandable. More forcefully than any other American founder, Madison broke from the classical republican teaching that the state ought to nurture and support religion because religion is good for republican government. Madison can be contrasted with individuals like George Washington, who offered one of the clearest expressions of the traditional approach in his Farewell Address. “Of all the disposition and habits which lead to political prosperity,” Washington wrote,

Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Man and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity.³⁵

Because he thought religion was indispensable in nurturing the moral qualities necessary for republican citizenship, Washington thought that the government ought to endorse and promote religion.³⁶

Madison rejected this classical republican teaching. He did not deny that virtue was an important aid to republican government or that religion helped to nourish virtue. Madison himself wrote in a private letter that

the belief in a God All Powerful wise & good, is so essential to the moral order of the World & to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources nor adapted with too much solicitude to the different characters & capacities to be impressed with it.³⁷

But Madison vehemently disagreed that religion required the support of government. He articulated his position most forcefully in Article 6 of his “Memorial and Remonstrance”:

Because the establishment proposed by the Bill³⁸ is not requisite for the support of the Christian Religion. To say that it is, is a contradiction to the Christian Religion itself; for every page of it disavows a dependence on the powers of this world: it is a contradiction to fact; for it is known that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them; and not only during the period of miraculous aid, but long after it had been left to its own evidence, and the ordinary care of Providence: Nay it is a contradiction in terms; for a religion not invented by human policy, must have pre-existed and been supported, before it was established by human policy. It is moreover to weaken in those who profess this Religion a pious confidence in its innate excellence, and the patronage of its Author; and to foster in those who still reject it, a suspicion that its friends are too conscious of its fallacies, to trust it to its own merits.³⁹

After he left the presidency, Madison made this same point repeatedly in his private correspondence. In an 1819 letter to Robert Walsh touting the increase of religious instruction since the American Revolution, Madison wrote:

It was the Universal opinion of the Century preceding the last, that Civil Gov^t. could not stand without the prop of a Religious establishment, & that the Xⁿ. religion itself would perish if not supported by a legal provision for its clergy. The experience of Virginia conspicuously corroborates the disproof of both opinions. The Civil Gov^t., tho’ bereft of every thing like an associated hierarchy possesses the requisite

stability, and performs its functions with complete success; Whilst the number, the industry, and the morality of the Priesthood, & the devotion of the people, have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State.⁴⁰

In response to receiving a sermon sent by New York clergyman F. L. Schaeffer, Madison stated,

The experience of the United States is a happy disproof of the error so long rooted in the unenlightened minds of well-meaning Christians, as well as in the corrupt hearts of persecuting usurpers, that without legal incorporation of religious and civil polity, neither could be supported. A mutual independence is found most friendly to practical religion, to social harmony, and to political prosperity.⁴¹

Madison sounded the same theme the following year in a letter to Edward Livingston:

We are teaching the world a great truth that Governments do better without kings and nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson: that Religion flourishes in greater purity without, than with the aid of government.⁴²

Madison's position that religion does not need the support of government—nay, that it will better flourish without the support of government—reflects two prior suppositions. He believed that religion contained within itself the prerequisites for its own perpetuation. “[T]here are causes in the human breast, which ensure the perpetuity of religion without the aid of the law,” Madison wrote to Edward Everett.⁴³ In a letter to Rev. Jasper Adams written at the end of his life, Madison similarly stated,

There appears to be in the nature of man what insures his belief in an invisible cause of his present existence, and anticipation of his future existence. Hence the propensities & susceptibilities in that case of religion which with a few doubtful or individual exceptions have prevailed throughout the world.⁴⁴

Madison did not elaborate or explain what these “causes in the human breast” are. Given his comments cited above about “the finiteness of the human understanding” and its inability to resolve questions pertaining to the beginning of the world, Madison may have thought man's inability to grasp the beginning of existence placed “in the

nature of man” a propensity to turn to religion, a propensity supported by the hope for life after death. Whatever the causes, Madison thought men were naturally disposed to seek a power beyond themselves, and thus naturally inclined toward religious belief. This fact, he claimed, comported with the history of early Christianity itself, which demonstrated that government does not need to support religion for religion to flourish.

Madison also argued against government support of religion because he believed that such support tended to corrupt religion and to encourage religious persecution. He identified two types of corruption in particular. First, dependence on government corrupted religious clergy by freeing them from accountability to the laity. “Experience witnesseth [*sic*],” Madison wrote in Article 7 of the “Memorial and Remonstrance,”

that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries, has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both superstition, bigotry and persecution. Enquire of the Teachers of Christianity for the ages in which it appeared in its greatest lustre; those of every sect, point to the ages prior to its incorporation with Civil policy. Propose a restoration of this primitive state in which its Teachers depended on the voluntary rewards of their flocks; many of them predict its downfall. On which side ought their testimony to have greatest weight, when it is for or against their interest?⁴⁵

Madison suggests that when clergy are dependent on the voluntary contributions of church members for their income, they must serve the laity. Excessively prideful and indolent ministers will likely be unpopular and, hence, unsupported. Without state support, moreover, the laity themselves are less likely to be passive, because they must actively choose to contribute to those who minister to them. Government support of clergy thus lessens responsibility in both the clergy and the laity, causing the spiritual harm to both.

Madison thought that state support corrupted religion, secondly, by introducing incentives to religious persecution. Because funded religions depend on the state for their livelihood, their clergy, Madison wrote to Bradford,

will naturally employ all their art and interest to depress their rising adversaries; for such they must consider dissenters who rob them of the good will of the people, and may, in time, endanger their livings and security.⁴⁶

Without state funding, religious ministers would face competition from clergy of other sects for voluntary contributions—with religious pluralism, some form of competition was inevitable. But Madison thought state involvement encouraged a harmful type of competition. Instead of directly appealing to the laity to secure voluntary contributions, clergy funded by the state would be more likely to attempt to protect their position through nonmarket means, such as state regulation or even legal constraints on minority sects. Connection with and dependence on the state encouraged government-supported religions to use the power of the state to curb religious dissent. State funding of religion thus inevitably introduced the “diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution.”⁴⁷

Religion and Madison’s Presidencies

Madison most significantly shaped church-state relations as a legislator in Virginia where he led the battle to pass Jefferson’s “Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom” and as a U.S. congressman when he drafted and shepherded the passage of the First Amendment. His presidencies, accordingly, are usually not the object of focus for scholars concerned with his understanding of the role of religion in American public life. Yet we can learn something about the rigidity and the difficulty of maintaining his principle of noncognizance by turning to his presidential period.

In February 1811, Madison vetoed a bill passed by Congress that incorporated the Protestant Episcopal Church of Alexandria, D.C.⁴⁸ In addition to recognizing the church as a corporate body, the bill specified rules for electing and removing the church’s ministers. This, Madison said, would make the church a religious establishment by law, because it would subject sundry rules and proceedings pertaining purely to the church’s internal organization to enforcement by the state. Madison also objected to Section 8 of the bill, which stated, “That it shall and may be lawful for the said vestry to make such provisions for the support of the poor of the said church as shall by them be thought proper.” This provision, Madison claimed, “would be a precedent for giving to religious Societies as such, a legal agency in carrying into effect a public and civil duty.”⁴⁹ The most important words of Madison’s sentence are “as such.” Madison feared that the bill’s language suggested that the church possessed legal sanction to help the poor because it was a church. Madison objected to giving “religious societies as such” a legal agency in carrying into effect public

duties, because a government noncognizant of religion cannot grant privileges to religious groups on account of their religious character.

Madison's veto reflects a strict application of his noncognizance principle; he was less doctrinaire, however, when asked to proclaim official days for prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving. Madison issued four such presidential proclamations, despite believing they were constitutionally suspect.

After his second term, Madison backtracked, offering a fivefold objection to religious proclamations by the president.⁵⁰ He claimed, first, that government ought not to interpose in those matters in which it lacks authority to pass laws. "An *advisory* Govt [*sic*]," he said, "is a contradiction in terms." Since the national government could not pass a law mandating citizens pray and fast, Madison decided that it ought not recommend such measures. Second, members of the government "can in no sense be regarded as possessing an advisory trust from their Constituents in their religious capacities." Madison grants that in his private capacity the president might recommend that citizens pray; but, if so, his recommendation ought to reflect its true character. Third, presidential proclamations "imply and certainly nourish the erroneous idea of a *national* religion." Fourth, the proclamations have a tendency to narrow the recommendation to the standard of the predominant sect. Fifth, and finally, Madison warns that such proclamations too easily can be used (or appear to be used) for partisan gain, which is "to the scandal of religion, as well as to the increase of party animosities."⁵¹

Given these concerns, which Madison intimates he possessed while president, how could he issue four religious proclamations and so clearly violate his own philosophical and constitutional principle? In his postpresidential critique of the presidential religious proclamations, Madison never admits that he did compromise his principle. Instead, he explains that at the time it was known that he was "disinclined" to issue official religious proclamations. Congress, nonetheless, passed joint resolutions requesting them, and Madison says, "[I]t was thought not proper to refuse a compliance altogether."⁵²

But Madison could have refused. President Jefferson declined to issue official religious proclamations during his presidency because he believed they violated the First Amendment. A precedent had been established; a refusal by Madison would not have broken new ground. Madison must have concluded that the political price of not issuing the proclamations was too high. No doubt his calculations were influenced by the trials of the War of 1812, during which the proclamations were issued, but this does not seem to justify a clear violation of principle.

In his own defense, Madison notes that he employed a form and language in his proclamations that were

meant to deaden as much as possible any claim of political right to enjoin religious observances by resting these expressly on the voluntary compliance of individuals, and even by limiting the recommendation to such as wished simultaneous as well as voluntary performance of a religious act on the occasion.⁵³

A perusal of the text of the proclamations reveals Madison's carefulness in writing them and his hesitancy in issuing them. He begins all four recommendations by explicitly noting that Congress has called for them. All four proclamations make clear that they are advisory only, each using a form of the word "recommend" before suggesting the possibility of prayer. In his second proclamation, Madison recommends vows and adorations only "to all those who should be piously disposed." He states, furthermore,

If the public homage of a people can ever be worthy the favorable regard of the Holy and Omniscient Being to whom it is addressed, it must be that in which those who join in it are guided only by their free choice, by the impulse of their hearts and the dictates of their consciences.

The proclamations, moreover, were not sectarian. None contain any references to Jesus Christ, but rather they encourage public homage to "the Sovereign of the Universe and Benefactor of Mankind" (first proclamation), "Great Parent and Sovereign of the Universe" (second proclamation), "Almighty God" and "Beneficent Parent of the Human Race" (third proclamation), and "Almighty God" and "Great Disposer of Events" (fourth proclamation).⁵⁴

Despite his efforts to emphasize their advisory character, Madison's proclamations directly contradict his standard of religious "noncognizance." During his presidency, Madison was unable to maintain a strict adherence to his principled understanding of religious liberty.

Conclusion

James Madison would disagree with those today who call for state recognition of religion or state support for religion as such. As a legislator and president, James Madison sought (not always successfully) to privatize religion. He acknowledged that religion can play an important role in public life insofar as it supports personal virtue,

but, unlike George Washington, Madison did not believe that the government ought to support religion as such. Religion, he concluded, ought not to receive special privileges or considerations. Madison's fundamental prudential assumption, which was not shared by more classical republicans like Washington, was that religion did not need governmental support and that such support inevitably proved to be detrimental to religion and religious freedom.

Madison would also disagree with today's strict separationists and those who champion "the wall of separation" interpretation of the Establishment Clause. Madison interpreted the right to religious freedom to prevent the state from adopting policies that unfavorably target or disfavor religion as such.

The extent to which these political teachings flowed from Madison's personal religious convictions is impossible to say, as the tenets of his personal creed are elusive. We can say that his argument for the right to religious freedom is built upon a political theology of religious individualism consistent with many forms of Protestant Christianity.

Regardless of its origin, James Madison offers a thoughtful and comprehensive political philosophy of church-state relations. Whether he offers a politically wise approach we must decide for ourselves. Whatever verdict we render, our deliberations surely will be profited by attention to Madison's thought and practice regarding the role of religion in American public life.

Notes

1. Cited in James Hutson, "James Madison and the Social Utility of Religion: Risks vs. Rewards," paper presented as part of the symposium James Madison: Philosopher and Practitioner of Liberal Democracy at The Library of Congress, Washington, DC, March 16, 2001, <http://www.loc.gov/loc/madison/hutson-paper.html>, 2. Rives summarizes his interpretation of Madison's religious studies as follows:

What was the result in his [Madison's] mind of these profound and laborious inquiries [into Scripture and theology], prosecuted with all the freshness and energy of his intellectual powers, appears very significantly, although incidentally in a letter written by him two years later [in 1774] to his young Pennsylvanian friend [William Bradford]. Speaking of the celebrated Tracts of Dean Tucker on the dispute between England and her American colonies, which he had just then read with much satisfaction at the practical solution of the controversy recommended by that author, in a voluntary separation of the two countries, Mr. Madison adds:—"At the same time, his ingenious and plausible defence [*sic*] of parliamentary

authority carries in it such defects and misrepresentations as confirm me in political authority, after the same manner as the specious arguments of infidels have established the faith of inquiring Christians.”

William C. Rives, *History of the Life and Times of James Madison*, 3 vols. (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1859–1868; repr. 1970), 1: 35–36. Rives seems to assume that Madison identifies himself as the “inquiring Christian” whose faith has been established. Such an inference may be possible, but is not necessary from the text itself. It is not clear that Madison means to suggest that his faith had been established by reading “the specious arguments of infidels.”

2. Garrett Ward Sheldon, “Religion and Politics in the Thought of James Madison,” in *The Founders on God and Government*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 84.
3. Emphasis is in the original; Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding*, expanded ed. (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 139.
4. Irving Brant, *James Madison* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941), 1: 277.
5. John West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 67.
6. *Ibid.*, 68.
7. Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 80.
8. Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 46–47.
9. William Lee Miller, *The Business of May Next: James Madison and the Founding* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 106.
10. Sheldon, “Religion and Politics in the Thought of James Madison,” 86.
11. Mark Noll, *Princeton and the Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 8–9.
12. Sheldon and Mary-Elaine Swanson emphasize Madison’s education as decisive in shaping what they believe to be his Calvinist idea of man and politics. According to Sheldon, Madison adopted a “distinctively Calvinist” view of human nature (91). Swanson claims that while at Princeton Madison “imbibed Witherspoon’s Calvinistic view of [depraved] human nature” (126). The significant weakness in both of these authors’ accounts is they ascribe to Madison ideas and concepts that he himself does not use. Sheldon, for example, repeatedly claims that *Federalist* 10 reflects Madison’s appreciation of “sinful humanity (101).”
13. Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty*, 80.
14. Hutson, “James Madison and the Social Utility of Religion,” 4.
15. Miller, *The Business of May Next*, 106.

16. James Madison to William Bradford, November 9, 1772, in *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, ed. Robert S. Alley (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1985), 44.
17. James Madison to William Bradford, September 25, 1773, in Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 45–46.
18. James Madison to Frederick Beasley, November 20, 1825, in *Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt, 9 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 9: 230–231.
19. Ralph Ketcham reports, “Four large pages of closely written notes in Madison’s hand on The Gospel of St. John, The Acts of the Apostles, and the Proverbs of Solomon have been dated 1772 by Irving Brant.” See Ketcham, “James Madison and Religion,” 181–182. Ketcham’s citation to Brant, however, is missing and therefore cannot be easily verified. For Brant’s discussion of Madison’s notes on Scripture see Brant, *James Madison*, 1: 118–119. For Rives’s discussion of the same material see Rives, *History of the Life and Times of James Madison*, 1: 33–34.
20. Publius (Madison), *Federalist* 37, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, intro. Charles Kesler (New York: Mentor, 1999), 101. But in *Federalist* 10, Madison himself never uses the term “sinful.” Madison’s political thought may be compatible with a Calvinist view of man’s sinfulness, but this does not make Madison’s thought necessarily Calvinist. See Sheldon, “Religion and Politics in the Thought of James Madison”; and Mary-Elaine Swanson, “James Madison and the Presbyterian Idea of Man and Government,” in *Religion and Political Culture in Jefferson’s Virginia*, ed. Garrett Ward Sheldon and Daniel L. Dreisbach (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 197.
21. James Madison to Frederick Beasley, November 20, 1825, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 9: 230. Three days later in a letter to Charles Caldwell Madison wrote,

I concur with you at once in rejecting the idea maintained by some diviners of more zeal than discretion that there is no road from nature up to Nature’s God, and that all the knowledge of his existence and attributes which preceded the written revelation of them, was derived from oral tradition.

James Madison to Doctor C. Caldwell, November 23, 1825, in *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, 4 vols. (New York: R. Worthington, 1884), 3: 505.
22. It lies beyond the scope of this chapter to present a thorough interpretation of the argument of the “Memorial and Remonstrance.” Elsewhere I have argued that Madison’s principle of religious liberty in the “Memorial” is most accurately understood as a principle of religious “noncognizance.” See Vincent Phillip Muñoz, “James Madison’s Principle of Religious Liberty,” *American Political Science Review*, 97 (February 2003): 17–32.
23. For Madison’s contribution to the drafting of Article 16 of the Virginia Declaration of Rights see Daniel L. Dreisbach, “George Mason’s Pursuit

of Religious Liberty in Revolutionary Virginia,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 108 (2000): 5–44.

24. I disagree with Thomas Lindsay who, in interpreting the “Memorial and Remonstrance,” claims, “Madison’s project for religious liberty is theoretically grounded in the denial of human capacity to know the nature of and existence of the commands of—and thus the duties toward—revelation’s God.” See Thomas Lindsay, “James Madison on Religion and Politics: Rhetoric and Reality,” *American Political Science Review*, 85 (4) (December 1991): 1326.
25. Romans 13: 1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).
26. Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty*, 436, n. 68. Gary Rosen makes a similar point, referring to “the obvious Protestant subtext” of the “Memorial.” Rosen then draws out the following theological implications: “Religious truth becomes a particular sort of experience rather than a doctrine. In this view, sincerity takes the place of right-thinking and—acting.” Gary Rosen, *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 23.
27. With regards to this point, Lance Banning states,

Admittedly, this [the Christian point of view of the “Memorial” may have been a tactical consideration, but it was not a *necessary* tactic in this situation. I am convinced that Madison consistently adopted tactics that did not dissemble his private views, that there was a very little of the propagandist in his makeup. The Memorial is thus my major reason for concluding that his thinking still had room for the authority of revelation at least as late as 1785.

Banning’s emphasis; *Sacred Fire of Liberty*, 436, n. 68. Thomas Lindsay, on the contrary, argues that Madison’s theology in the “Memorial” was merely rhetorical and disconnected to his private views. See Lindsay, “James Madison on Religion and Politics,” 1321.
28. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947).
29. *Ibid.* at 1, 39, 41. It should be noted that Justice Rutledge dissented in *Everson*. His interpretation of Madison, however, was shared by Justice Black, who wrote the Court’s majority opinion.
30. Irving Brant, “Madison: On the Separation of Church and State,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, series 3, vol. 8 (January 1951): 3.
31. See Justice Souter’s concurring opinions in *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 615 (1992) and *Rosenberger v. University of Virginia*, 515 U.S. 819 (1995). The strict separationist interpretation of Madison has been challenged by justices Rehnquist and Thomas. See Rehnquist’s dissenting opinion in *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985) and Thomas’s concurring opinion in *Rosenberger*. For further discussion of the use of Madison in Establishment Clause jurisprudence and scholarship see Muñoz, “James Madison’s Principle of Religious Liberty,” 17–19.
32. See Muñoz, “James Madison’s Principle of Religious Liberty”; and “Religion and the American Founding,” *Intercollegiate Review*, 38(2) (Spring/Summer 2003): 33–43.

33. Brant, "Madison: On the Separation of Church and State," 21–24; Elizabeth Fleet, "Madison's 'Detached Memoranda,'" *William and Mary Quarterly*, series 3, vol. 3 (October 1946): 558–562.
34. James Madison, "Remarks on Mr. Jefferson's Draught of a Constitution," sent to John Brown, ca. October 15, 1788, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 5: 284–294. Madison's reference "to another article of the plan" refers to next three paragraphs below the provision excluding clergymen from public office. That text states, "The general assembly shall not have power to infringe this constitution, to abridge the civil rights of any person on account of his religious belief, to restrain him from professing and supporting that belief." The relevant passages of Jefferson's draft of a constitution can be found in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb, 20 vols. (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 2: 286–287.
35. George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, in *The Writings of Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 38 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), 35: 229. Washington's Farewell Address was not a speech but a long letter addressed "To the PEOPLE of the United States," first published in *American Daily Advisor*, Philadelphia's largest newspaper. For a discussion of the drafting and publication of the Farewell Address, see Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character*, introduction by Daniel J. Boorstin (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 45–61; and Felix Gilbert, *To The Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), chapter V.
36. For an elaboration of George Washington's position, see Vincent Phillip Muñoz, "George Washington on Religious Liberty," *The Review of Politics*, 65 (Winter 2003): 11–33. The Washingtonian classical republican position was adopted most clearly in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, Pt. 1, Article 3:

As the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality, and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of GOD, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality: Therefore, to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of GOD, and for the support and maintenance of public protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provisions shall not be made voluntarily.

37. James Madison to Fredrick Beasley, November 20, 1825, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 9: 230.
38. Madison wrote the “Memorial and Remonstrance” to oppose Patrick Henry’s pending bill erecting a general Protestant religious establishment in Virginia. Henry’s bill was a property tax, in which each property owner was to specify the Christian denomination to which he wished his tax directed. If a taxpayer failed or refused to specify a Christian society, his tax would go to the public treasury “to be disposed of under the direction of the General Assembly, for the encouragement of seminaries of learning . . . and to no other use or purpose whatsoever.” The taxes received by the various denominations were to be “appropriated to a provision for a Minister or Teacher of the Gospel, or the providing of places of divine worship, and to none other use whatsoever.” The purpose of the bill was to keep the Christian ministry, particularly Episcopalian clergy, active and solvent. In effect, it would have granted a direct subsidy to Christian clergymen.
39. Even as a young man, Madison expressed doubts regarding whether religion needed the support of government. In 1773, he posed the following questions to his good friend William Bradford:
- Here allow me to propose the following Queries. Is an Ecclesiastical Establishment absolutely necessary to support civil society in a supreme Government? and [*sic*] how far is it hurtful to a dependent State? I do not ask for an immediate answer but mention them as worth attending to in the course of your reading and consulting experienced Lawyers and Politicians upon. When you have satisfied yourself in these points I should listen with pleasure to the Result of your researches.
- James Madison to William Bradford, December 1, 1773, in Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 46–47.
40. James Madison to Robert Walsh, March 2, 1819, in Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 81.
41. James Madison to F. L. Schaeffer, December 3, 1821, in Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 82.
42. James Madison to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 9: 102–103. See also James Madison’s letter to Edward Everett, March 19, 1823, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 9:127.
43. James Madison to Edward Everett, March 19, 1823, in Hunt, ed., *Writings of James Madison*, 9: 126–127.
44. James Madison to Jasper Adams, Spring 1833, in Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, 87.
45. Madison’s reproachful view of the established Anglican clergy in colonial Virginia may have decisively shaped his thinking on ecclesiastical establishments. As early as 1774 he wrote to his good friend William Bradford,

If the Church of England had been the established and general religion in all the northern colonies as it has been among us here [in Virginia],

and uninterrupted tranquility had prevailed throughout the continent, it is clear to me that slavery and subjection might and would have been gradually insinuated among us.

James Madison to William Bradford, January 24, 1774, in *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison*, ed. and intro. Marvin Meyers, rev. ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), 2.

46. James Madison to William Bradford, January 24, 1774, in Meyers, ed., *The Mind of the Founder*, 3.
47. Ibid.
48. The following description of Madison's presidential vetoes is taken from Muñoz, "James Madison's Principle of Religious Liberty," 27–28.
49. Veto Message to the House of Representatives, February 21, 1811, in *The Papers of James Madison*, Congressional Series (17 vols.), Secretary of State Series (7 vols.), and the Presidential Series (5 vols.), ed. Stagg, Cross, and Perdue (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984–), 3:176. Congress passed the bill on February 8, 1811. Following Madison's veto, the House of Representatives debated the constitutionality of the bill and the means of reconsidering it before voting against its passage on February 23, 1811. See *Annals of Congress*, 11th Congress, 3rd Session, 129, 453, 828, 983–985, 995–998.
50. The exact date of Madison's comments is unknown, but they are thought to have been written between 1817 and 1832. See Fleet, "Madison's 'Detached Memoranda,'" 534–536.
51. All emphasis belongs to Madison; *ibid.*, 560–161.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. Madison's four proclamations requesting days of prayer and thanksgiving can be found in James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents: 1789–1897* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 1: 513, 532–533, 558, 560–561.

Chapter Four

Lincoln's Political Religion and Religious Politics: Or, What Lincoln Teaches Us about the Proper Connection between Religion and Politics

Lucas E. Morel

Much of the debate over Lincoln and religion centers on his faith (or lack thereof), with scholars and laymen alike arguing for or against Lincoln's Christianity in a way that has virtually eclipsed what Lincoln would have seen as a more important issue: How should religion inform politics, especially in a self-governing regime? What can we learn about Lincoln's political appeal to, and use of, religion that teaches us its proper role in Republican government?

First, as a successful republic requires a moral or self-controlled people, Lincoln believed that religion could help moderate the excesses of passion and self-interest in the community. As a means of achieving this social order, Lincoln promoted "support of the Constitution" and "reverence for the laws" to become what he called "the *political religion* of the nation."¹ Lincoln believed that the perpetuation of the free government established by the American Revolution depended on this almost sacred law-abidingness,² and he called on both politician and preacher to promote this "political religion."

Second, while the political uses of religion seem to predominate in Lincoln's politics, he never forgot that religion existed for a higher purpose than supporting government. Lincoln, in other words, did not confuse the political utility of religion with religion's true aim: to connect people to God, not to their government. This is why he accommodated the religious expression of the American citizenry through various public acts. For example, in 1862 he issued an order for a Sabbath observance "by the officers and men in the military and naval service"³; in 1861, he recommended that Congress appoint and pay for hospital chaplains. He also protected the religious freedom of Southerners from Union generals, who in some instances had

undertaken to govern churches in the South. Between 1861 and 1864, Lincoln issued ten executive proclamations of local and national days of fasting, thanksgiving, and prayer. Regardless of Lincoln's own religious beliefs, as a politician he spoke and acted so as to preserve the legitimate sphere of action for both government and religion.

Third, Lincoln noted, however, that religion was not all sweetness and light for America. He also concerned himself with the detrimental effect that religious extremists could have on free government, as exhibited by some moral reform movements that promoted temperance and abolition. Some of these reform societies tended to approach their causes with a self-righteousness that allowed little room for discussion and hence posed a threat to the deliberative processes of self-government.⁴ In them he sensed a religious character that could lead to excesses adverse to constitutional government: namely, theocratic absolutism, which would undermine a regime based on public deliberation as opposed to a theological litmus test. This is seen most clearly in his 1842 speech to the Springfield Washington Temperance Society. Lincoln's genius was displayed in his preaching and practice of a political religion and religious politics that preserved the respective domains of both government and religion.

As early as 1838, at the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Lincoln addressed a problem the United States faced as its Revolutionary War veterans passed this earth, leaving no living memory to help perpetuate the grand American experiment in self-government. Vigilante justice was on the rise in the United States. Lincoln saw this as a major weakening of the republic, and believed only a "political religion" of reverence for the laws and the Constitution could prevent mob rule and the resultant anarchy from giving rise to a "towering genius" who sought to gratify his thirst for fame "at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen."⁵ In the address, Lincoln proclaims,

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.⁶

His religious examples—"reverence," "seminaries," "preached from the pulpit," and "sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars"—and religious tone rouse the listener to the seriousness of his cause, a seriousness

evoked earlier by calls to one's patriotism and ancestry and now complemented by the aura of religion. Religion, here, serves the republic as the handmaiden of government in the latter's effort to ensure obedience to its laws—an obedience conducive of not only civil but also religious liberty.⁷

Curiously, Lincoln omits the executive branch when he lists the key individuals and institutions that should preach what he calls "political religion." By calling strict obedience to the laws a political "religion," Lincoln emphasizes the importance of spreading this message in the same manner that a preacher spreads the word of God. Perhaps the executive department is present under the guise of "the pulpit," implying that a religious aspect must be donned by the chief administrator of government—the executive, one uniquely situated among the branches of government to speak with one voice. As the chief law enforcer of the community, and thus one called to promote law-abidingness, the executive must adopt the mode of a preacher to enlist the community as fellow believers. If a republic needs a "political" religion to survive, as Lincoln makes clear, its executive must become its "political" preacher—which is precisely what Lincoln is doing in this speech.

Aside from "political religion" and, more generally, the political utility of religion, Lincoln's political practice also points to political respect for religion. This may have been driven, in part, from his own growing appreciation of religion in his own life. For example, in the summer of 1864, Lincoln invited his longtime friend Joshua F. Speed to spend the night at his retreat at Soldiers' Home, just three miles north of the White House. Speed wrote of his stay at Soldiers' Home years later, and it gives perhaps the clearest indication of Lincoln's religious faith late in life:

As I entered the room, near night, he was sitting near a window intently reading his Bible. Approaching him I said, "I am glad to see you so profitably engaged." "Yes" said he, "I am profitably engaged." "Well," said I, "If you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not." Looking me earnestly in the face, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he said, "You are wrong Speed, take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man."⁸

Speed notes that Lincoln had come a long way from his early days of religious "skepticism."⁹ This famous recollection of Lincoln's dearest friend reveals an appreciation of religion that transcends its mere usefulness to the government. For Lincoln, religion *qua* religion had a purpose far beyond that of simply supporting the government: it

existed to fulfill a divine purpose between an individual and God and ought not to be viewed solely in light of its political utility. Because religion's reason for being stands independent of political necessity, Lincoln made sure to enlist its services to the regime without subverting its own reason for being. He saw to it that government, while he was at the helm, accommodated religion as the citizenry saw to its higher end.

This understanding of religion's ambivalent support of the state has only recently been revived in scholarly circles.¹⁰ For example, historian Mark Y. Hanley argues that "Protestant spiritual discourse, anchored by religious jeremiads and regular sermons, . . . placed faith's temporal benefits on a fulcrum that gave weighted advantage to a transcendent spirituality beyond the Commonwealth." In other words, while some religious leaders saw a close affinity of purpose between Christianity and the American republic, others presented "faith's capacity to improve society as a subordinate aim" to its highest priority: pointing men and women toward "a spiritual destiny beyond the commonwealth."¹¹

A telling example of Lincoln's respect for revealed religion, especially as a principal influence on society, is his 1846 "Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity." In his run for Congress in 1846, Lincoln campaigned against the well-known Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright. Friends told Lincoln that Cartwright "was whispering the charge of infidelity" against him,¹² suggesting that Lincoln held unorthodox views about religion. Lincoln, therefore, responded with a handbill explaining his understanding of the controversy.

As the July 31, 1846 handbill contains the most direct expression of Lincoln's view of religion and public life, at least to that point in his life, we quote it in its entirety:

To the Voters of the Seventh Congressional District.

FELLOW CITIZENS:

A charge having got into circulation in some of the neighborhoods of this District, in substance that I am an open scoffer at Christianity, I have by the advice of some friends concluded to notice the subject in this form. That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the "Doctrine of Necessity"—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have

sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument. The habit of arguing thus however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years. And I add here, I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations. The foregoing, is the whole truth, briefly stated, in relation to myself, upon this subject.

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion. Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his Maker, I still do not think any man has the right thus to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live. If, then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who could condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.¹³

Lincoln admits that he is not a member of any Christian church. As a state legislator, Lincoln did not attend church services regularly. Soon after he moved to Springfield, the new state capital, he wrote to Mary Owens, "I've never been to church yet, nor probably shall not be soon. I stay away because I am conscious I should not know how to behave myself."¹⁴ In the midst of the Civil War he would confess, "I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am."¹⁵ His closest friend, Joshua F. Speed, also recalled Lincoln's personal struggle of faith during his early years in Springfield: "When I knew him, in early life, he was a skeptic." Speed added, however, that Lincoln "was very cautious never to give expression to any thought or sentiment that would grate harshly upon a Christian's ear."¹⁶ The exoneration implicit in his handbill—"I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures"—lies with his belief that infidelity or lack of faith lies primarily in one's view of the Holy Scriptures and not with membership at a particular church congregation.

Most important, Lincoln wishes to address the political relevance of a candidate's religious beliefs and practice. He adds that he never spoke "with intentional disrespect" of religion or any particular denomination. His concern not to show disrespect toward the faith of others can be seen in his draft of a speech comparing Thomas Jefferson and Zachary Taylor (the Whig presidential candidate in 1848) on the presidential veto power: "They are more alike than the accounts of the crucifixion, as given by any two of the evangelists—more alike, or at least as much alike, as any two accounts of the inscription, written and erected by Pilate at that time."¹⁷ In his only term as congressman, Lincoln omitted the biblical reference in his final draft. He knew enough not to stir up controversy over apparent inconsistencies in the Bible.

Some have been troubled by Lincoln's reticence in the 1846 handbill to profess anything specific about his religious beliefs.¹⁸ To be sure, Lincoln had little time for religious doctrines and sectarian institutions derived from the Holy Scriptures by fallible human minds and was careful not to misrepresent himself religiously on the stump.¹⁹ But this view places too great an emphasis on Lincoln's "political expediency," for he only intended to clarify his rumored "infidelity." Lincoln felt no obligation to share personal religious views that he believed bore little or no relevance to the campaign at hand. He therefore shows that his avoidance of sins of commission is the only relevant political consideration, not any sins of omission. The latter may have "eternal consequences" to be worked out "between him and his Maker," but this bears no import to political affairs. Lincoln chose to explain his understanding of religion and civil society to help his constituents know the legitimate expectations they should have regarding a candidate's public attitude toward religion.

This is why Lincoln does not state explicitly what he thinks about the Bible or any particular Christian doctrine. Like George Washington, James Madison, and other American founders, Lincoln did not think the public profession of one's religious convictions contributed much for the community to consider when deciding on a candidate for office or when discussing the merits of a specific public policy. An undue emphasis on one's religious beliefs, moreover, could easily lead to factious politics, with no easy means of resolving disagreements. Here religion in the public square could give rise to factious majorities ruling according to their numerical might, as opposed to principled right, and therefore threaten the perpetuation of American self-government. In short, elections should not be turned into a forum for resolving religious quarrels.

In the handbill, Lincoln volunteers an account of his belief "in early life" in the doctrine of necessity, which seems to deny the free will of man. However, he emphasizes that five years had passed since he last made these arguments, they were never made in public, and they were understood by him to be shared by several Christian denominations. A case in point would be his own parents' church in Kentucky, Little Mount Separate Baptist Church. They were part of the "Separate" Baptist movement, otherwise known as primitive or "hardshell" Baptists for their strict predestination doctrines.²⁰ In short, Lincoln's belief in the doctrine of necessity was a private matter not intended for the public ear and one that did not threaten Christian orthodoxy because none existed on the subject. He offers this personal information in the event that it might have been the source of the rumor of his

religious infidelity. In the second paragraph, Lincoln shares his understanding of how the rumor might trouble the consciences of some of his constituents—hence, the reason for no longer debating his said belief even privately “with one, two or three.”

As already noted, Lincoln stated his uncertainty in supporting a political candidate whom he knew to be “an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion.” Lincoln defends the community’s “feelings” connected with religion; they should be immune from public “insult.” While the private insult of a neighbor’s religion is hardly intended by Lincoln, his emphasis on the feelings of “the community” leaves room for *discussing* the truth of a particular religion with one’s neighbor without the malice and recklessness accompanying the intentional slight of a fellow citizen’s convictions. Religion deals with a man’s conscience and hence should be handled with care—especially if that man is a neighbor and fellow citizen.

During his first run for Congress in 1842, Lincoln showed respect for a community’s religious sensibilities—despite personally experiencing “the strangest church influence” against him—in a letter written to a delegate to the Seventh Congressional District convention after the campaign was over:

Baker is a Campbellite, and therefore as I suppose, with few exceptions got all that church. My wife has some relatives in the Presbyterian and some in the Episcopal Churches, and therefore, wherever it would tell, I was set down as either the one or the other, whilst it was every where contended that no ch[r]istian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no church, was suspected of being a deist, and had talked about fighting a duel. With all these things Baker, of course had nothing to do. *Nor do I complain of them. As to his own church going for him, I think that was right enough*, and as to the influences I have spoken of in the other, though they were very strong, it would be grossly untrue and unjust to charge that they acted upon them in a body or even very nearly so. I only mean that those influences levied a tax of a considerable per cent. upon my strength throughout the religious community.²¹

In the eyes of churchgoers, his dueling episode with James Shields the previous year,²² lack of church membership, and suspected deism crippled his campaign to be nominated as the Whig candidate of Sangamon County. Lincoln confesses that he found his campaign hampered by public doubts over his religious inclinations; yet, he does not begrudge his opponent (and close friend) for drawing the support of his own community church. Here, Lincoln grants not only the likelihood but the propriety of winning the support of those most

acquainted with you. For example, in his first run for the Illinois State House, the 23-year-old Lincoln received 277 out of 300 votes from his hometown precinct—the political equivalent of a congregation.²³ Even though it turned out to be a losing bid, Lincoln's first campaign for public office demonstrated the power of proximity or affection for what is near and dear, which he extends to one's church.

He also guards the "morals" fostered by the religious sentiments of the community from public "injury." To disregard the consequences of undermining a community's religious beliefs is to place too sanguine a confidence in the principles and practices of what one would substitute in their place. As George Washington expressed this in his Farewell Address:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and cherish them.²⁴

Lincoln leaves "the higher matter of eternal consequences" to the offending party "and his Maker," and preserves religious freedom, on the one hand, and promotes social responsibility, on the other. George Washington set the example:

The liberty enjoyed by the people of these states of worshipping Almighty God agreeably to their consciences, is not only among the choicest of their *blessings*, but also of their *rights*. While men perform their social duties faithfully, they do all that society or the state can with propriety demand or expect; and remain responsible only to their Maker for their religion, or modes of faith, which they may prefer or profess.²⁵

As president, Lincoln explicitly acknowledged the nation's debt to the Almighty through proclamations of days of religious observance. Lincoln called for national days of thanksgiving, fasting, and prayer 11 times. In his last public address, following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Lincoln states, "In the midst of this [celebration], however, He, from Whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for a national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated."²⁶ These proclamations, as well as other speeches involving religion in the public sphere, show the mutual benefit that Lincoln believed religion and government could have on each other.

An early example of Lincoln's attempt to show the limits of religious expression in the public square is found in his 1842 Temperance Address, a speech ostensibly about moderation or temperance with regards to alcohol but at its core focused on tempering or moderating excess in political discussion. Ironically, this speech about speech judiciously employs religious imagery to subtly point out how excessive religious expression in public debate can subvert the political trust, humility, and compromise that greases the wheels of Republican government.²⁷

Lincoln's reference to the early temperance reformers as "Old School" champions alludes to a recent division among American Christians over the severity of original sin. In 1838 the Presbyterian Church suffered a schism, presaged by heresy trials earlier that decade, that produced an "Old School" and a "New School" bloc.²⁸ C. Bruce Staiger writes that as the Presbyterian Church sought to minister to the western settlements under its 1801 "Plan of Union," the incorporation of Congregationalists in their endeavor brought in "the liberalizing Pelagian and Arminian ideas of Unitarianism." The result was "a bitter theological quarrel between the strictly orthodox Calvinists of the Old School and the New School group which embraced the 'radical' New Divinity representative of the Congregational influence."²⁹ The debate centered around the doctrine of original sin, that men are born into the sin of Adam with only a few foreordained for salvation and the rest destined for damnation.³⁰ Opposed to the strict Calvinism of old guard Presbyterians, the New School held that man possessed free will. Charles Finney, the New School revivalist par excellence, described a man's conversion as an act of his will: "[I]f the sinner ever has a new heart, he must . . . make it himself." Moreover, "All sin consists in selfishness; and all holiness or virtue, in disinterested benevolence."³¹ Here lies the connection between the Second Great Awakening and the social reform movements that would sweep across America from the late 1820s through the 1830s.³² A few examples of Lincoln's subtle employment of religious imagery should illustrate the threat he saw in religious movements becoming political causes.

Lincoln alludes to both the predestination and temperance controversies in his discussion of "persuasion," where he uses a more fitting and hopeful means of convincing a person of one's opinion: "On the contrary, assume to dictate to his judgment, or to command his action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised, and he will retreat within himself, close all the avenues to his head and his heart; and though your cause be naked truth itself, transformed to the heaviest lance, harder than steel, and sharper than steel can be made, and

tho' you throw it with more than Herculean force and precision, you shall be no more able to pierce him, than to penetrate the hardshell of a tortoise with a rye straw." Not only does "hardshell" connote the Old School understanding of original sin and predestination, held by so-called hardshell or primitive Baptists and the like,³³ but "rye straw" also alludes to the distilling cereal of rye whiskey, the frontiersman drink of choice. By alluding to the "hard doctrines" of Old School, hardshell Calvinists along with frontier rye whiskey, he juxtaposes religious and drinking imagery as a not so subtle critique of Old School rhetoric. To penetrate a "hardshell" with a "rye" straw was a roundabout way of saying that it would be as difficult to force a teetotaling (Old School) Calvinist to drink as it would be to persuade someone to give up drinking by condemning them. Given the Old School Presbyterian connotation to "Old School" temperance reform, Lincoln's use of the phrase could not have been missed by his audience—seated as they were in the Second Presbyterian Church of Springfield. He could not have picked a more coincidental (and controversial) pairing of religious doctrine and social reform.

Of course, the greatest example of Lincoln's religious politics comes in his Second Inaugural Address. Beginning his second term as president, Lincoln delivers a four-paragraph reflection on American theodicy—the problem of evil, specifically, slavery, in God's Providence. Where the original draft of the Gettysburg Address contains no direct reference to God, the Second Inaugural Address places God's purposes in the American Civil War front and center.³⁴ Lincoln interprets how the war had progressed under both human and divine intention and action, and where the Almighty may yet direct its consummation. Significantly, the address shows the extent to which Lincoln sees the reason and religion of men fall short in averting a civil war. In a telling demonstration of Republican statesmanship under the Providence of God, Lincoln ironically uses both reason and religion to deliver the lesson.³⁵

Foremost in his mind was uniting a divided nation. Only a common understanding of the war—its cause and meaning for the fractured country—could ensure a lasting peace. At the height of his rhetorical powers, Lincoln showed how both the war and emancipation came to the country despite the initial intentions of either side of the conflict. Another power must be at work, and Lincoln returned the country to that other, higher power in hopes that a common, national humility before the Almighty would help Americans both North and South to fix what they had broken. How else could Lincoln expect there to be "malice toward none" and "charity for all"? Only by the grace of God

could all Americans experience and live out that “new birth of freedom” he called for at Gettysburg.³⁶

After a brief opening paragraph that explains why there's no need for “an extended address,” like that at his first inauguration, Lincoln devotes the remaining three paragraphs to an explanation of the Civil War—how it began, and what must follow its conclusion.³⁷

In the second paragraph, Lincoln states that at his first inauguration, no one North or South, Unionist or Secessionist, wanted a “civil war.” Thus, neither North nor South was initially culpable for a war that would cost so much in blood and treasure. But something proved more important than avoiding war. For Lincoln as president, “*saving the Union*” initially without war—through the words of his First Inaugural Address—was the goal, but eventually he would “*accept*” war rather than let it perish.” For “insurgent agents,” as Lincoln put it (and not “the South” or “Southern legislatures”), to “*destroy*” the Union without war through words of their own—“negotiation”—was the initial priority, but they soon would “*make* war rather than let the nation survive.”

Implicit in shifting the focus from war—i.e., its avoidance—to the Union—i.e., its preservation—is an invitation to consider the significance of the Union. Why is it so important that it is worth defending by force, if words fail? What would be lost in its dissolution, or what would be gained by preserving it? Why is the *United States* so important? But despite separating the combatants into saviors and destroyers, the second paragraph closes with a statement of the war's arrival and not a judgment of its earthly cause by linking the start of the war with the guilty party. This was not the time to foster sectional animosities. Lincoln's demonstration in the second paragraph of the failure of reason to avert the war will now be followed by a demonstration in the third paragraph of the failure of religion to do the same.

The third paragraph, the key paragraph of the speech, begins with his first reference to slaves—the issue that needs explaining as the Civil War nears its conclusion. He now says that slavery “somehow” was “the cause of the war,” with insurgents seeking to bolster slavery's hold on the United States “even by war.” The federal government only sought to “restrict” its extension. Somehow, the Union and slavery (and freedom by implication) are connected in some moral sense. Emancipation was a surprise to both sides—one more “fundamental and astounding.” In short, the war brought about a momentous change in the American regime, but one that neither side intended. If unintended, then the Radical Republicans and Northerners, in

general, could afford to tone down their pride at being “victorious in the strife.”

So, neither side intended the war or the abolition of slavery, but both cataclysms took place anyway. What else needs to be explored? The ways of Providence in American history. Here Lincoln’s “God talk” begins in earnest.

Lincoln observes that both sides “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.” Implication? No war should have been started, since both sides should have viewed the cause of the conflict in the same way—God’s way. No such luck! Lincoln notes that despite their common faith in God, “each invokes His aid against the other.”

Lincoln now pauses to comment on the audacity of invoking God’s help to enslave others: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged.” While the loaded language (i.e., “dare,” “just God’s,” “wringing,” and “sweat”) indicates where Lincoln stands regarding the justice of slavery, he asks the nation not to “judge” those who would dare ask God for help in enslaving others. In the context of the verse he quotes (Matthew 7:1), the judgment feared is divine. Lincoln seeks to avoid a further reckoning on top of that which may already be working itself out as punishment for the offense of slavery. Lincoln concludes that the “Almighty has His own purposes” because the prayers of neither have been answered fully. This conclusion becomes the premise upon which Lincoln bases his theological supposition about the meaning of the war and slavery’s passing from the American stage.

Lincoln now connects the Civil War and slavery theologically by citing Matthew 18:7: “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” This verse expresses one of the fundamental paradoxes of Christianity: free will and the sovereignty of God (or, human, moral agency and hence responsibility coupled with original sin or man’s fall from grace). Lincoln suggests that although slavery appears to be an offense allowed “in the providence of God,” the human beings who introduced and maintained it in America are still morally culpable.

Lincoln cannot tell this story of the nation at war with itself without bringing God into the fray. The American people need a common understanding of the war—its ultimate and efficient causes—in order to move forward as a unified country. For the eminent termination of the war to produce the “lasting peace” he mentions in the fourth paragraph, for the war between Americans really to be over, they must

all have the same memory of it—the same history of it. And to Lincoln's mind, the ending of the war must be a "just" one to produce this peace that endures. Most important, a common view of the justice of the war requires a godly perspective. By his own earlier reasoning, Lincoln has his work cut out for him, for despite the nation's common Bible and God, the American people did not have a common, biblical view of slavery. Its justice or injustice was the source of disagreement among Americans that led to the Civil War.

Lincoln tries to produce a common view of the war by withholding judgment upon the South alone for the evil of slavery. He supposes that slavery was an offense that came due to both Southern and Northern citizens, and one that God "now wills to remove" through "this terrible war," which afflicts Americans both North and South.

But why should Americans, especially those on the Confederate side, believe this rendering of history? Why should Southern Secessionists and former slaveholders now believe that slavery was wrong and thus view the war as a "scourge" of the Almighty? Because it offers the best explanation for what Americans experienced with regards to the war and slavery. How else to explain what Lincoln showed was inexplicable in the second paragraph and early in the third paragraph? How else to account for a war no one wanted and an emancipation no one expected? Moreover, if God visited a war upon the United States as punishment for the offense of slavery, and slavery disappears by virtue of that war, no American North or South can blame the other for the calamity *and* escape blame himself. Put simply, common guilt means common punishment—and if accepted as such, a common future is possible under God. The third paragraph offers a collective punishment for collective guilt in order to set up the collective healing process and peace of the concluding paragraph of Lincoln's speech.

The last paragraph begins with the most famous line of the address: "With malice toward none; with charity for all . . ." Because of the losses suffered by Americans due to the Civil War, Lincoln suggests an end to the blame game insofar as it divides Americans into hostile camps. Crudely stated, what Americans broke as a nation, they must now fix as a nation—with God's help. He exhorts them to "finish the work" they are in, which means conclude the war with a Union victory, and to heal the wounds of citizen against citizen by caring for the soldier and his family. He then states that "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace," Americans must be firm "in the right, as God gives [them] . . . to see the right." Here Lincoln calls on the nation to do what the war could not do: build a

common life from the ruins of a divided country. Only as Americans rely upon God and His enlightenment, as He allows them “to see the right,” does Lincoln believe the battle for Union on the field of war can be won off the field and in the hearts of every American. The temptation to malice will be great; the temptation to withhold charity, including forgiveness, will be great as well.

But how can Lincoln encourage Americans to act “with firmness in the right”? Both sides had read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, but drew opposite conclusions that led to a devastating Civil War. What has Lincoln done in his speech to bolster their confidence that they can not only “see the right,” but also come to a common understanding of it despite their previous differences of opinion? If Americans have learned anything from the war and slavery’s abolition, it’s their inability to produce good on their own. Lincoln hopes to foster a Republican humility and moderation, borne of a renewed reliance upon God, that can reconstruct a bitterly divided nation.

And so Lincoln starts them with what can be clearly understood from their common Bible and prayers to God: “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”³⁸ On their own, Americans would be tempted to harbor malice in their hearts toward their perceived erring brethren, and find little incentive to act with goodwill and love toward them. Only by the grace of God will they be able to experience “a new birth of freedom” as a self-governing people free of the taint of slavery. With one-eighth of the population now newly freed men, and still greatly concentrated in the South, the task of national reconstruction is made all the more difficult.

In addition, if the war is seen as a divine scourge and not an earthly one, then one’s hatred of the enemy must dissipate or else be directed toward the heavens. But “the believers in a Living God” could not permit themselves this option, for they worship a God whose judgments they believe to be “true and righteous altogether” (Psalms 19:9). This includes the malice Northerners would wish to express against Southerners, and vice versa, as well as that by former slaves toward their former masters. Charity, not malice, must mark their actions toward each other—North versus South, former slave versus former master, white versus black. Unfortunately, peace between North and South was purchased primarily for whites and at the cost of scapegoating blacks following the failure of Reconstruction.

Having gone through the speech as a whole, we can now see why Lincoln had to hide or diminish the culpability of the South for the Civil War: “a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves”—in short, a restoration of the Union—depended on blame being shared by all

Americans. But Lincoln could not ignore the issue entirely, for he also sought to unite the country as one where slaves would be free from their bondage. In other words, as he declared at Gettysburg, he intended the American people, North and South, to experience “a new birth of freedom.” This meant that Southern Secessionists would not be held solely responsible for causing the war; but it also required that they change their mind about the meaning of America. The Union was now to be what Lincoln always understood it to be in principle—a union devoted to protecting the equal rights of all her citizens. It was a bargain of sorts, which Lincoln explained with a rhetoric both political and theological far exceeding any of his public career.

Following his second inaugural, Lincoln wrote of his address:

I expect the latter to wear as well as—perhaps better than—any thing I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.³⁹

Through reason and religion, Lincoln shows how reason and religion failed to avert the American Civil War in order to induce the humility that will be needed for the work ahead. What failed to prevent war among Americans must now succeed in order to unite them.

For me, to examine Abraham Lincoln's view of religion's role in Republican politics is to learn about American self-government: namely, to learn about the abiding tension between our commitment to the equal rights of humanity and our obligation to secure those rights by the consent of the governed. Understanding the relevance of religion and, especially, Christianity, to Lincoln's politics helps us better understand his defense of the American constitutional union as an expression of his faith in God's purposes for himself and his country. As Lincoln put it before the New Jersey Senate en route to his first inauguration:

I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.⁴⁰

Notes

1. "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (27 January 1838)," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 1: 112. Hereafter cited as *Collected Works*; all emphases in original except where otherwise noted.
2. For an interpretation of Lincoln's religious development as it influenced his politics that emphasizes his early devotion to "republican ideals" instead of "God or scripture," see Nicholas Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation," *Civil War History*, 46 (3) (September 2000): 227–253.
3. "Order for Sabbath Observance (15 November 1862)," in *Collected Works*, 5: 497.
4. Cf. John G. West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996). West shows that some evangelical reform movements—in particular, those addressing the Sunday mails and the Cherokee removal controversies—made their social and political appeals not merely on religious grounds but on the basis of human reason:

Because government authority would be kept separate from ecclesiastical authority, churches now could be trusted to create—and defend—civic morality. Stripped of any pretensions that might have made them dangerous to republicanism, churches were free to reform society according to the moral law held in common by both revelation and reason. *The Politics of Revelation and Reason*, 210.

Robert N. Bellah observes that the more moderate wing of abolitionism, led by Theodore Dwight Weld, sought reform by calling for greater enforcement of the U.S. Constitution:

Weld and his associates developed a constitutional argument that even as early as 1835 described the treatment in the North of free Negroes and abolitionists as "denials of rights to the equal protection of the laws, the safeguards of due process, and the privileges and immunities of citizens." . . . Unlike Garrison the group around Weld believed that emancipation was implicit in the Constitution and that what that document needed was not burning [as Garrison did] but clarification and enforcement. *The Broken Covenant*, 52.

5. "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (27 January 1838)," in *Collected Works*, 1: 114.
6. *Ibid.*, 1: 112.
7. An exhortation to law-abidingness can be found in the Bible in 1 Timothy 2: 1–4, among other places, which gives Christians the hope that their obedience to the government will produce both peace for them and salvation for others:

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are

in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

8. Joshua F. Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln and Notes of a Visit to California* (Louisville, KY: John P. Morton & Company, 1884), 32–33. Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, in their compilation of recollected Lincoln utterances, rank this story a “C” on a scale of “A” to “E” for reliability. (“A” denotes a Lincoln quotation recorded by the auditor within days of hearing it, and “E” denotes a quotation that “is probably not authentic.”) “C” is a quotation “recorded noncontemporaneously.” In Speed’s case, his published account of his encounter came 20 years after the fact. Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 414, lii–liii. According to Mary Todd Lincoln, Lincoln “read the bible a good deal about 1864.” See “Mary Todd Lincoln (William Herndon (hereafter referred to as WHH) interview [September 1866]),” in *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 360. Wayne C. Temple records that Joshua F. Speed joined Trinity Methodist Church late in life in Wayne C. Temple, *Abraham Lincoln: From Skeptic to Prophet* (Mahomet, IL: Mayhaven Publishing, 1995), 295, n. 123. See also *infra*, n. 15.
9. In an 1866 letter to William Herndon, Speed commented on Lincoln’s faith: “I think that when I first knew Mr L he was skeptical as to the great truths of the Christian Religion. I think that after he was elected President, he sought to become a believer—and to make the Bible a preceptor to his faith and a guide for his conduct.” “Joshua F. Speed to WHH (12 January 1866),” in Wilson and Davis, eds., *Herndon’s Informants*, 156.
10. For a similar interpretation offered earlier this century, see Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935), chapter 6, “Religion and Politics,” and chapter 7, “The Religious Solution,” 102–128.
11. Mark Y. Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 158, 31. See also Christoph Schönborn, “The Hope of Heaven, the Hope of Earth,” *First Things* (52) (April 1995): 32–38; and George Weigel, “The Church’s Political Hopes for the World; or, Diognetus Revisited,” in *The Two Cities of God: The Church’s Responsibility for the Earthly City*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 59–77.
12. “To Allen N. Ford (11 August 1846),” in *Collected Works*, 1: 383.
13. “Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity (31 July 1846),” in *Collected Works*, 1: 382.
14. “To Mary S. Owens (7 May 1837),” in *Collected Works*, 1: 78.

15. "Remarks to Baltimore Presbyterian Synod: Two Versions [No. 1] (24 October 1863)," in *Collected Works*, 6: 535. The context for his remark, though, paints a less skeptical picture of Lincoln's faith. In the immediately preceding sentence, Lincoln states that as president he "was early brought to a living reflection that nothing in my power whatever, in others to rely upon, would succeed without the direct assistance of the Almighty, but all must fail." The sentence that follows Lincoln's wish that he was "more devout" actually affirms his piety: "Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance in God, knowing that all would go well, and that he would decide for the right." *Collected Works*, 6: 535, 536. Among the earliest extant writings of Lincoln's is a handwritten copybook of arithmetic, a page of which includes the following rhyme: "Abraham Lincoln/his hand and pen/he will be good but/god knows When." "Copybook Verses [1824–1826]," in *Collected Works*, 1: 1. Cf. the assessment by Francis B. Carpenter, a portrait painter who lived at the White House for six months in 1864 as he painted a reenactment of Lincoln's first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation: "In the ordinary acceptation of the term, I would scarcely have called Mr. Lincoln a *religious* man,—and yet I believe him to have been a sincere *Christian*." Emphasis is in the original; Francis B. Carpenter, *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995; originally published in 1866 as *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* by Hurd and Houghton, NY), 185–186. Biographer Ward Hill Lamson, a member of Lincoln's inner circle as president, turns Carpenter's view on its head semantically, while expressing the same sentiment: "He was not a Christian in the orthodox sense of the term, yet he was as conscientiously religious as any man." *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847–1865*, ed. Dorothy Lamson Teillard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994; originally published by A. C. McClurg & Co., 1895, 2nd ed., expanded in 1911, Washington, DC), 334. This echoes Mary Todd's statement to William H. Herndon: "[H]e was a religious man always, as I think," but "he was not a technical Christian." "Mary Todd Lincoln (WHH interview [September 1866])," in *Herndon's Informants*, 360.
16. Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln*, 32. Cf. Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 309–312, which argues of Lincoln: "Disguising his religious views, or construing them in a more favorable light, became necessary for an ambitious and rising man who needed the good opinion of the public to succeed" (312).
17. "Speech in U.S. House of Representatives on the Presidential Question (27 July 1848)," in *Collected Works*, 1: 503.
18. Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Mind of Abraham Lincoln: A Study in Detachment and Practicality," in *Essays on Lincoln's Faith and Politics*,

- ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 8.
19. The passage cited most often on this subject comes from a eulogy Congressman Henry C. Deming delivered before the General Assembly of Connecticut in 1865: "He [Lincoln] said, he had never united himself to any church, because he found difficulty in giving his assent, without mental reservations, to the long complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith." William J. Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963; originally published under the title *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* by Doubleday & Company, 1959), 74. The Fehrenbachers rank Deming's recollection a "C" (on a scale of "A" to "E") for reliability. *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, 137.
 20. Allen C. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 18 (Winter 1997): 66–67; Temple, *Abraham Lincoln*, 6.
 21. Emphasis added; "To Martin S. Morris (26 March 1843)," in *Collected Works*, 1: 320.
 22. "To James Shields (17 September 1842)" 1: 299–300; and "Memorandum of Duel Instructions to Elias H. Merryman [19 September 1842)," in *Collected Works*, 1: 300–302. For a brief history of Christian antagonism toward dueling in early America, see *Church and State in the United States: Historical Development and Contemporary Problems of Religious Freedom under the Constitution*, ed. Anson Phelps Stokes, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 2: 5–12.
 23. "Communication to the People of Sangamo County (9 March 1832)," in *Collected Works*, 1: 5, n. 1. He ran eighth out of 13 candidates for 4 seats in the lower house of the Illinois General Assembly. Nevertheless, his New Salem returns were all the more impressive given that he only recently moved to the area six months prior to announcing his candidacy for Illinois State Representative. In addition, he interrupted the campaign for three months to lead a local militia brigade in the Black Hawk War, being elected captain by his men. Two years later, he would run second in a field of 13 candidates for 4 Sangamon County seats, and poll first (out of 17 candidates) in his next two reelection bids.
 24. "Farewell Address (19 September 1796)," in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 521. Lincoln would make explicit reference to Washington's Farewell Address in his famous Cooper Institute Address; however, the context was not religion but rather sectionalism due to the slavery controversy. "Address at Cooper Institute, New York City (27 February 1860)," in *Collected Works*, 3: 536–537.
 25. "To the Annual Meeting of Quakers (September 1789)," in Allen, ed., *George Washington*, 533.
 26. "Last Public Address (11 April 1865)," in *Collected Works*, 8: 399–400.

27. For a close interpretation of Lincoln's Temperance Address, see Lucas E. Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), chapter 4, "The Political Vices of Religion."
28. For an examination of this split as it related to the political tensions of the times (slavery, in particular), see C. Bruce Staiger, "Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837–1838," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 36 (December 1949): 391–414. See also Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997; originally published by Cambridge University Press, NY, 1993), chapter 4, "Harbingers of Disunion: The Denominational Schisms," 113–150; *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid with Robert D. Linder, ed. Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), s.v. "New School Presbyterians," 819–820; and *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), s.v. "Presbyterianism," by Louis Weeks, 1: 502–503. The Methodists and Baptists would split in 1843 and 1845, respectively, over the issue of slavery. See Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America: To the Civil War* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 491–497.
29. Staiger, "Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837–1838," 393.
30. For a brief history of this doctrinal development within the Presbyterian Church, see Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933), 3–12. See also Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 311–314 and 189–190 for discussion of the preceding generation's dispute over the doctrine of original sin and the free will of man.
31. Cited in Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse*, 11.
32. Barnes lists several of the early aims of "the Great Eight" societies that would take shape under the leadership of the Great Revivalists like Charles Grandison Finney and protégé Theodore Dwight Weld: promoting home and foreign missions, distributing Bibles and tracts, funding Sunday schools, promoting temperance, and converting sailors. He notes, "[T]he benevolent empire was dominated by 'New-School' Presbyterians, liberals of the Great Revival." Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse*, 17, 18. See also Staiger, "Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism," 397: "Although Finney devoted himself almost exclusively to revivalism, his doctrines lent themselves to a great interest in social reform. Theodore Dwight Weld, a convert of Finney's, shaped this interest into another revival, one in which slaveholding was identical with sin." Weld would go on to become the great temperance speaker of frontier America, as well as write *Slavery as It Is*, an 1839 book from which Harriet Beecher Stowe mined details for her 1852 literary bombshell, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

See Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 230.

33. For derivation of the “hard shell” label and its theological import, see “Baptist Churches in U.S.A.” and “Primitive Baptists” descriptions in the *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 110–111 and 940, respectively, and “Primitive Baptist” in Frank S. Mead, ed., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, rev. Samuel S. Hill, 9th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 51–52.
34. Lincoln probably added the phrase “under God” on the platform as he listened to Edward Everett’s oration. Lincoln’s famous last line reads as follows: “[T]hat this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg (19 November 1863),” in *Collected Works*, 7: 23 and 7: 20, n. 19. Cf. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 194, 198, and 261: “[T]hat the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”
35. See Morel, *Lincoln’s Sacred Effort*, chapter 5, “The Political Limits of Reason and Revelation.”
36. But as David W. Blight argues in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), national unity would soon come at the expense of black Americans.
37. All citations from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address are from “Second Inaugural Address (4 March 1865),” in *Collected Works*, 8: 332–333.
38. Cf. Andrew Jackson, “Second Inaugural Address (4 March 1833),” in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents: 1787–1897*, ed. James D. Richardson, 20 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 3: 3: “To do justice to all and to submit to wrong from none has been during my Administration its governing maxim . . .”
39. “To Thurlow Weed (15 March 1865),” in *Collected Works*, 8: 356.
40. “Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey (21 February 1861),” in *Collected Works*, 5: 236.