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## George Washington and the Religious Impulse

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“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” wrote George Washington, “Religion and morality are indispensable supports.”<sup>1</sup> These words are perhaps George Washington’s best known statement concerning religion, and since their publication in 1796, they have been invoked time and again by defenders of religion in American public life.

During the nineteenth century, evangelical Christians active in politics regularly cited Washington’s words against critics who claimed that religion had no place in the public square. In 1803, when evangelist Lyman Beecher called on churches to form voluntary associations to promote morality in public life, he cited neither the Bible nor another minister as the irrefutable authority on the subject. He instead invoked this passage from Washington. Beecher’s underlying implication was clear: If Washington recognized that “a national morality” could not “prevail in exclusion of religious principles,”<sup>2</sup> surely no other American would dare brand this idea un-American. Similarly, when the inhabitants of Castleton, Vermont petitioned Congress about the need for respecting the sabbath in 1830, they too relied on Washington as their authority, supplying a lengthy paraphrase of the “Farewell Address.” “Religion & morality are

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<sup>1</sup>Washington, “Farewell Address,” (September 19, 1796), *Writings of George Washington*, ed. by John Fitzpatrick (Washington: U.S. George Washington Bicentennial Commission), XXXV: 229.

indispensible supports of political prosperity, & of all free governments,” they wrote Congress. “No patriot will ever attempt ‘to subvert these great pillars of human happiness; these firmest props of the duties of man.’ The religious man & the politician ought to protect & cherish them alike.”<sup>3</sup> A century and a half later, twentieth century religious believers took similar inspiration from Washington’s words when attacked for wrongly injecting God into politics.

Paradoxically, while Washington has become well known for his lucid defense of faith in public life, there has been considerable controversy over the years about the precise nature of his own religious convictions. As early as the 1830s, there were debates about whether George Washington was a Christian. In the pages of the *New York Free Inquirer*, Robert Dale Owen claimed Washington was a deist,<sup>4</sup> and in lecture halls Frances Wright boldly asserted that “Washington was not a Christian... he believed not in the priest’s God, nor in the divine authority of the priest’s book.”<sup>5</sup> Defenders of Washington’s piety responded in 1836 with *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington*, a 414-page tome by E.C. McGuire that depicted the General as devoted to constant prayer, the frequent taking of Communion, and the diligent observance of the Christian sabbath.<sup>6</sup> An intervening century did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm for inquiries into Washington’s religion. In 1919 William Johnson published a defense of

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<sup>2</sup> Washington, quoted by Beecher, *The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies Instituted for That Purpose* (New London, Conn.: Samuel Green, 1804), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Petition from citizens of Castleton and vicinity, Vermont (received, February 22, 1830), petitions received, House Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, Records of the United States House of Representatives, Record Group 233 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration).

<sup>4</sup> See Paul F. Boller, *George Washington and Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, quoted in Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 15. Even in some evangelical pulpits Washington’s orthodoxy came under suspicion; in Albany, Episcopal divine Bird Wilson lamented that Washington “was a great and good man, but he was not a professor of religion.” Wilson, quoted in Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 15.

Washington's orthodoxy titled *George Washington the Christian*; and in 1959 historian Paul Boller sought to lay to rest such accounts with his *George Washington and Religion*.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1980s, political theorist Walter Berns was including Washington among the clear enemies of traditional Christianity. Lumping Washington together with James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, Berns claimed that all three “were opposed to revealed religion and understood it to be incompatible with an attachment to ‘Nature’s God.’”<sup>8</sup> These men supported the separation of church and state “not primarily because they wanted to accommodate the varieties of religious beliefs,” but because they supported the idea of natural rights, an idea clearly “incompatible with Christian doctrine....”<sup>9</sup> A few defenders of Washington’s piety remained, largely among evangelical Christians. If Washington “were... living today,” insisted Baptist minister Tim LaHaye in 1987, “he would freely identify with the Bible-believing branch of evangelical Christianity that is having such a positive influence on our nation.”<sup>10</sup> Historically speaking, LaHaye’s statement was not as presumptuous as it might first appear. After Washington’s death in 1799, all sorts of religious groups in America, from Catholics to Unitarians, sought to claim the Father of the Country as their very own.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> E.C. M’Guire, *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836).

<sup>7</sup> William J. Johnson, *George Washington the Christian* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1919); Boller, *George Washington*.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Berns and Harry Jaffa, “Were the Founding Fathers Christian?” [Debate in the “Correspondence” section], *This World*, Spring/Summer 1984, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Berns in Edward R. Norman, “Christians, Politics, and the Modern State (with a comment by Walter Berns,” *This World*, Fall 1983, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Tim LaHaye, *Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1987), 113.

<sup>11</sup> See discussion in Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 24-25.

## **Religion in Washington's Private Life**

So what was Washington's personal religious life in reality? Was he an opponent of revealed religion, a conventional Episcopalian, an evangelical Christian, or something in between? Whatever he was in his private life, it is clear that he was no Deist. That is, he did not believe in a God who created the world and then left it to run itself. No one who reads either the public or private writings of Washington can seriously doubt that he devoutly believed in a personal God who controls human events through his continuing care. The doctrine of God's providence, in fact, suffuses almost everything Washington wrote.

Washington was especially convinced that America's success in the Revolutionary War bore testimony to a God who actively rules the affairs of men. When writing his farewell orders to his soldiers at the end of the war, Washington reminded them: "The disadvantageous circumstances... under which the war was undertaken can never be forgotten. The singular interpositions of Providence in our feeble condition were such, as could scarcely escape the attention of the most unobserving."<sup>12</sup> In Washington's First Inaugural Address, his "first official act" as President, he likewise paid homage to the

Almighty Being who rules over the universe; who presides in the councils of nations; and whose providential aid can supply every human defect... No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men, more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.

Washington's unshakeable belief in God's sovereignty instilled in him a profound sense of humility and submission to God's will. Even Washington's public supplications

to God are striking for their lack of presumption. Instead of calling on God to bless the nation with material blessings, Washington characteristically asked only that God “grant... such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.”<sup>13</sup> The same humility can be found in his personal correspondence. Responding to a report that his crops were failing because of drought, Washington wrote his manager at Mt. Vernon with apparent calmness: “At disappointments and losses which are the effects of Providential acts, I never repine; because I am sure the alwise disposer of events knows better than we do, what is best for us, or what we deserve.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, upon learning that a friend had just lost three children, Washington gently advised him:

From the friendship I have always borne you, and from the interest I have ever taken in whatever related to your prosperity and happiness, I participated in the sorrows which I know you must have felt for your late and heavy losses. But [it] is not for man to scan the wisdom of Providence. The best he can do, is to submit to its decrees.<sup>15</sup>

Washington clearly believed in a God who actively rules every part of the universe and who merits our worship and obedience. Washington also accepted the immortality of the soul and a transcendent moral law. What remains unclear is how much Washington believed in addition. What, for example, did he believe about Christ? The evidence on the subject is partial, contradictory, and in the end, unsatisfactory.

On the one hand, Washington was a regular member of a traditional Protestant denomination, the Episcopal Church of Virginia; and he served faithfully in that church in the lay offices of vestryman and churchwarden, offices that would have required him

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<sup>12</sup> Washington, “Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States,” in *George Washington: A Collection*, edited by W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1988), 267.

<sup>13</sup> Washington, “Thanksgiving Proclamation” (October 3, 1789), *George Washington: A Collection*, 535.

<sup>14</sup> Washington to William Pearce (May 25, 1794), *Writings*, XXXIII: 375.

to take an oath of loyalty to the doctrinal confession of the church.<sup>16</sup> Regarding Christ, Washington encouraged the Delaware tribe in 1779 to “learn our ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ”; and in his circular to the states in 1783, he referred to Christ as “the Divine Author of our blessed religion.”<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that Washington refused the sacrament of communion from the time of the Revolution until his death, and his references to Christ in his speech to the Delaware and in his circular to the states are arguably his only specifically Christian doctrinal statements.<sup>18</sup> Usually Washington appeared to regard differences in theology as irrelevant, commenting at one point: “Being no bigot myself to any mode of worship, I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity in the church, that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem the most direct plainest easiest and least liable to exception.”<sup>19</sup>

In the end, one cannot be dogmatic about the details of Washington’s personal piety. He was a faithful member of his chosen church, and he certainly believed in a personal God who is sovereign over human affairs. Further than that, we cannot say with certainty.

### **Religion in Washington’s Public Life**

One does not need to untangle the subtleties of Washington’s personal piety, however, in order to understand his view of the vibrant role religion plays in society.

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<sup>15</sup> Washington to Henry Knox (March 2, 1797), *Writings*, XXXV: 408-409.

<sup>16</sup> See Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1859), II: 215, note 2; Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 68; Washington, “Circular to the States,” (June 8, 1783), *Writings*, XXVI: 496.

<sup>18</sup> See Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, 24-44.

<sup>19</sup> Washington to Marquis de LaFayette (August 15, 1787), *Writings*, XXIX: 259.

Whatever the ambiguities of his private theology, Washington's political theology was far from ambiguous. It incorporated three great propositions, propositions that helped form an American consensus on religion in public that lasted for much of our nation's history. First, Washington believed that religion served as the necessary defender of morality in civic life. Second, he maintained that the moral law defended by religion was the same moral law that can be known by reason. Third, he saw religious liberty as a natural right of all human beings.

### ***The Moral Function of Religion in Public Life***

Washington was one of the clearest proponents of what James Hutson has called the “founding generation's syllogism”<sup>20</sup> concerning religion and public life: Morality is necessary for republican government; religion is necessary for morality; therefore, religion is necessary for republican government.

The first prong of this syllogism—the importance of morality for republican government—comes through repeatedly in Washington's public utterances. In his First Inaugural Address, Washington declared that “the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the external rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained,” and he praised the talents and virtue of those who drafted the Constitution because they guaranteed that “the foundations of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.”<sup>21</sup> Washington again noted the importance of civic virtue in his First Annual Message to Congress by urging the diffusion of knowledge so that citizens would be able “to discriminate the spirit of liberty

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<sup>20</sup> James Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1998), 81.

from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last.”<sup>22</sup> Washington’s clearest articulation of the need for morality—and religion—in public life came in the famous passage in his Farewell Address cited previously. In that Address, Washington made clear that he believed it was “substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government.”<sup>23</sup>

The most salient fact about Washington’s emphasis on the need for virtue in American public life was not that his view was so unique, but that it was so commonplace. Washington did not claim that he was saying anything radically new by claiming that morality was tied to politics. Rather, he thought he was articulating the common-sense of the subject as accepted by the Founding generation. This point may seem odd to those schooled to believe that the Founders thought selfishness was the prime mover in politics. According to many modern scholars, the Founders thought they set up a government that was a machine that would run itself. By separating the powers of government among different branches, they created a system where “ambition would be made to counter ambition,” and government officials in one branch would find it in their interest to resist encroachments by officials of another branch.<sup>24</sup> In the words of George Will, it was “almost as though the Founders thought they had devised a system so clever that it would work well even if no one had good motives — even if there was no public-spiritedness.”<sup>25</sup>

This claim is sheer nonsense. Washington and his generation knew perfectly well

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<sup>21</sup> Washington, “First Inaugural Speech,” *George Washington: A Collection*, 462.

<sup>22</sup> Washington, “First Annual Message,” *George Washington: A Collection*, 469.

<sup>23</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address,” *Writings*, XXXV: 229.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

that citizens had to be self-controlled and honorable for free government to work. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.”<sup>26</sup> The less control the people exerted over themselves, the more control the government would have to impose from on high. Countless clergymen of the period sounded the same theme.

Congregationalist minister Nathanael Emmons, for example, argued that “nothing but the rod or arbitrary power is sufficient to restrain and govern a people, who have lost their virtue, and sunk into vice and corruption. Such a people are neither fit to enjoy, nor able to assert and maintain their liberties. They must be slaves.”<sup>27</sup>

Washington accepted this view, but he also went further. It is one thing to claim that virtue is necessary for republican government. It is another thing to claim that *religion* is necessary for the creation of that virtue. While the majority of the Founding generation clearly believed that social morality was inextricably tied to religion, a small but influential group of rationalists—Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, to name two—sometimes spoke as if secular education was at least a partial substitute for the

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<sup>25</sup> George Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 133 .

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Franklin to Messrs. The Abbe’s Chalut and Arnaud (April 17, 1787), *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Albert Henry Smyth (New York: Macmillan, 1905-1907), IX: 569.

<sup>27</sup> Nathanael Emmons, “The Evil Effects of Sin,” *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, ed. by Jacob Ide (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1842), II: 47. See also John M. Mason, “Divine Judgments,” (September 20, 1793), *Complete Works of John Mason*, edited by Ebenezer Mason (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), II: 59-60; Bishop James Madison, “Manifestations of the Beneficence of Divine Providence Towards America,” (1795) in *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: LibertyPress, 1991), 1319-1320; Zephaniah Swift Moore, “An Oration on the Anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America,” (1802) in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760-1805* (Indianapolis: LibertyPress, 1983), ed. by Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, II: 1212-1213; Samuel Kendal, “Religion the Only Sure Basis of Free Government,” (1804), *American Political Writing*, II: 1241-1263; Nathaniel Bouton, *Christian Patriotism* (1825), 6; Phineas Cooke, *Reciprocal Obligations of Religion and Civil Government* (Concord: Jacob B. Moore, 1825), 13; Nathaniel Bouton, *The Responsibilities of Rulers* (Concord: Henry F. Moore, 1828), 24-27; Daniel Dana, *An Election Sermon* (Concord: J.B. Moore, 1823), 17-18; *Sermon* (1822), 20-21; Nathan Lord, *A Sermon Preached at the Annual Election* (Concord: Hill and Barton, 1831); Lyman Beecher, “Reformation of

moral function traditionally served by religion. By the time of the 1790s, this claim was being made in a much more virulent form across the ocean by the fanatical leaders of the French Revolution. Washington decided to make his own view of the matter explicit in his Farewell Address.

There Washington characterized the idea “that morality can be maintained without religion” as a mere “supposition,” indicating his sympathy with those who believed that morality was indissolubly linked to religion. Nevertheless, Washington met the rationalists half-way: He argued that even if one concedes that education alone can instill morality, it can do so only in “minds of peculiar structure,” for “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, even if the morality of the ruling class may not be dependent upon religion, morality among the general citizenry is. Hence religion remains a *political* necessity if not an intellectual one.

Though often treated as a proof text, the passage on religion and morality in Washington’s Farewell Address was far from empty rhetoric on Washington’s part. It was a summary of how he had lived his public life. Indeed, the full meaning of this passage of the Farewell Address can only be understood in light of Washington’s actions as a statesman. Throughout his public career he actively promoted piety as essential to temporal political prosperity.

As a General during the Revolution, he issued frequent orders encouraging his soldiers to attend worship services and to cease taking God’s name in vain. On July 4, 1775, he wrote that he “requires and expects, of all Officers, and Soldiers, not engaged on

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Morals,” *Works of Lyman Beecher* (Boston: Jewett, 1852), II: 79-80, 99-101; Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, ed. by Joseph L. Blau (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963), 320-321.

actual duty, a punctual attendance on divine Service, to implore the blessings of heaven upon the means used for our safety and defence.”<sup>29</sup> And on July 9, 1776, he directed commanding officers

to see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay [the chaplains] ... suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious services. The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger — The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.<sup>30</sup>

In August 1776, Washington excused troops from fatigue duty on Sundays “[t]hat the Troops may have an opportunity of attending public worship, as well as take some rest after the great fatigue they have gone through....”<sup>31</sup> In the same order, Washington issued a rebuke of swearing, a reprimand he repeated with increasing fervor in the years that followed. On July 29, 1779, he finally wrote the following order, which is tinged by more than a little frustration:

Many and pointed orders have been issued against that unmeaning and abominable custom of *Swearing*, notwithstanding which, with much regret the General observes that it prevails, *if possible*, more than ever; His feelings are continually wounded by the Oaths and Imprecations of the soldiers whenever he is in hearing of them.

The Name of That Being, from whose bountiful goodness we are permitted to exist and enjoy the comforts of life is incessantly imprecated and profaned in a manner as wanton as it is shocking. For the sake therefore of religion, decency and order the General hopes and trusts that officers of every rank will use their influence and authority to check a

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<sup>28</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address,” *Writings*, XXXV: 229.

<sup>29</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” (July 4, 1775), *Writings*, III: 309.

<sup>30</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” (July 9, 1776), *Writings*, V: 245.

<sup>31</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” (August 3, 1776), *Writings*, V: 367.

vice, which is as unprofitable as it is wicked and shameful.<sup>32</sup>

Washington also declared days of thanksgiving for the army after major victories;<sup>33</sup> and after the war concluded, he applauded a minister's proposal that Congress present a Bible to every soldier in the Continental Army, though he noted that the proposal came too late to put into effect, because most of the soldiers had already been discharged.<sup>34</sup>

Returning to private life in Virginia, Washington embraced Patrick Henry's assessment bill that would have taxed citizens to support Christian ministers of their choice. After it became clear that the assessment was attracting a great deal of opposition, however, Washington wished the measure a swift death because he thought enacting it over the wishes of a "respectable minority" would be "impolitic."<sup>35</sup>

As President, Washington continued to advocate a public role for religion, issuing two national thanksgiving proclamations, the first after the adoption of the Constitution at the recommendation of Congress, and the second in 1795 after Jay's Treaty had been negotiated with England and the Whiskey Rebellion had been successfully put down.<sup>36</sup>

Washington apparently saw no difficulty in incorporating religious duties such as sabbath observance and reverence toward the name of God into civic morality. In the latter case, profanity against God was forbidden by "decency and order" as well as by revelation.<sup>37</sup> This view was undoubtedly in part a product of Washington's gentlemanly code of civility; but it was also a manifestation of his all-encompassing belief in

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<sup>32</sup> Washington, "General Orders," (July 29, 1779), *Writings*, XVI: 13.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Washington's appointment of a day of thanksgiving after America's victory in the battle of Monmouth. Washington, "General Orders" (June 30, 1778), XII:131.

<sup>34</sup> Washington to Reverend John Rodgers (June 11, 1783), *Writings*, XXVII: 1.

<sup>35</sup> Washington to George Mason (October 3, 1785), *Writings*, XXVIII: 285.

<sup>36</sup> Washington, "Thanksgiving Proclamation," (October 3, 1789), *Writings*, XXX: 427-428; "A Proclamation," (January 1, 1795), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. by James D. Richardson (Washington: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), I: 171.

<sup>37</sup> Washington, "General Orders," (July 29, 1779), *Writings*, XVI: 13.

Providence. Washington stressed time and again that the nation's prosperity depended upon God's Providence, which implied that impiety would make us the objects of God's wrath rather than the recipients of his mercy.<sup>38</sup>

### ***The Existence of a Transcendent Moral Law***

Although Washington believed that religion was the preeminent defender of morality in society, he did not think that the morality religion defended was something peculiar to itself. Unlike many in modern culture who dismiss the traditional morality taught by religion as somehow subjective, Washington maintained that the moral precepts propagated by religion were the same ones that could also be known by reason. In short, Washington believed in a natural moral order that could be known by reason as well as revelation. This belief in what might be called "natural law" was something Washington shared with almost all of the Founding generation. According to the Founders, when it came to morality, reason and religion spoke with one voice. One finds this idea restated in countless ways in the letters and documents of the Founding era. Time and again when the Founders argued on behalf of some proposition, they pointed out that it was supported by both reason and revelation. Thus, John Adams appealed to "revelation, and... reason too,"<sup>39</sup> "the bible and common sense,"<sup>40</sup> "human nature and the christian religion,"<sup>41</sup> and

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Washington, "General Orders," (July 4, 1775), *Writings*, III: 309; Washington to Major and Brigadier Generals (Sept. 8, 1775), *Writings*, III: 483; "General Orders," (July 9, 1776), *Writings*, V: 245; "General Orders," (August 3, 1776), *Writings*, V: 367; "General Orders," (July 29, 1779), *Writings*, XVI: 13; Washington to General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (May, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 15; Washington to the Religious Society Called Quakers (October, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 11; Washington to the Roman Catholics in the United States (December, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 10; Washington to New Church, Baltimore (January 27, 1793), *Writings*, XXXII: 315; "A Proclamation," (Jan. 1, 1795), *Compilation of Messages of the Presidents*, I: 171.

<sup>39</sup> Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law, No. 2," (August 1765), *Papers of John Adams*, edited by Robert Taylor (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977-), I: 115.

“God and Nature.”<sup>42</sup> John Jay cited “experience and revelation.”<sup>43</sup> James Madison invoked “reason and the principles of the [Christian] religion.”<sup>44</sup> Hamilton noted that the moral doctrines of Hobbes are “absurd” [i.e., against reason] as well as “impious” [i.e., against revelation].<sup>45</sup> Even Thomas Jefferson in later years saw fit to appeal to the “obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus”<sup>46</sup> as coincident with the morality of conscience and reason.<sup>47</sup>

George Washington’s writings expression the same convention, appealing to the authority of “religion and morality,”<sup>48</sup> “Reason, Religion, and Philosophy,”<sup>49</sup> “religion, decency, and order,”<sup>50</sup> and “Prudence, Policy, and a true Christian Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> In his Farewell Address, he claimed that the public benefits of religion should be recognized by “the mere politician, equally with the pious man.”<sup>52</sup> Washington’s clearest articulation of the claim that reason and revelation support the same moral code came in his First Inaugural Address, where he argued that God created the universe in such a way as to connect human behavior with natural rewards and punishments:

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<sup>40</sup> Adams, “A Dissertation,” (August 1765), *Papers*, I: 116.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Adams, “Discourses on Davila,” (1790), *Works of John Adams*, edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, 1856), VI: 397.

<sup>43</sup> Jay, “Address to the American Bible Society” (May 8, 1823), *Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, edited by Henry Johnston (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1890-93), IV: 488.

<sup>44</sup> Madison, “James Madison’s ‘Detached Memoranda,’” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1946), 560-561.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted in Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by Harold Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-79), I: 87.

<sup>46</sup> Jefferson to James Fishback (September 27, 1809), *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, edited by Dickinson Adams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 343.

<sup>47</sup> See discussion in John G. West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 75.

<sup>48</sup> Washington to different denominations residing in and near Philadelphia (March 3, 1797), *Writings*, XXXV: 416.

<sup>49</sup> Washington to Henry Knox (March 2, 1797), *Writings*, XXXV: 409.

<sup>50</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” (July 29, 1779), *Writings*, XVI: 13.

<sup>51</sup> Washington to Benedict Arnold (September 14, 1775), *Writings*, III: 492.

<sup>52</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address,” *Writings*, XXXV: 229.

There is no truth more thoroughly established, than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity: since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the external rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to emphasize that this belief in a natural moral order was shared by Christians and non-Christians alike among the Founding generation. Evangelicals like John Jay (first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), no less than champions of the Enlightenment such as Thomas Jefferson, agreed that basic moral principles could be known by reason and conscience. Accordingly, the Rev. John Witherspoon, James Madison's old teacher at Princeton, began his first lecture on moral philosophy by stating that the subject "... is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation."<sup>54</sup> Witherspoon went on to tell his students that using reason to apprehend morality was not a threat to revelation, for "If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter."<sup>55</sup> This acceptance of a natural moral order was not an invention of the Enlightenment; it had deep roots in the Christian natural law tradition articulated by a long line of Christian thinkers, including Augustine, Aquinas, Hooker, Calvin, and Luther.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Washington, "First Inaugural Address," *George Washington: A Collection*, 462.

<sup>54</sup> John Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> For good introductions to the Christian natural law tradition, see J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997) and Michael Cromartie, editor, *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Washington recognized that reason and revelation might occasionally be seen to differ on certain questions of public morality and justice. But unlike some other Founders, he almost never probed the areas of potential disagreement, though he certainly knew that such disagreements were possible, as in the case of Quakers who refused to take up arms in defense of their country.<sup>57</sup> Washington's unwillingness to concentrate on the disagreements between reason and revelation is understandable. He was a statesman, and his preeminent concern was not speculation but practice. His purpose was to lay the solid foundations on which a republic could be built, and exploration of the tensions between reason and revelation would have detracted from this purpose.

### ***Religious Liberty as a Natural Right***

Washington's solid support for religion's civic role was balanced by an equally firm defense of religious liberty, which he believed was a natural right possessed by all human beings. Curiously, some have suggested that Washington's support for religious freedom shows that he was opposed to traditional Christianity. Walter Berns, for one, claims that the support of religious freedom by Washington and other Founders indicated their hostility to revealed religion, because according to Berns, religious liberty "derives from a non-religious source" that is "incompatible with Christian doctrine."<sup>58</sup> While there were influential Enlightenment theorists hostile to traditional Christianity who advocated religious liberty, Berns completely misses the American context of the concept. Within the American tradition, nearly all of the defenders of religious liberty were devout

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<sup>57</sup> See Washington's letter to the Religious Society Called Quakers (October, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Berns, "Religion and the Founding Principle," in Robert Horwitz, editor, *The Moral Foundations of the Republic*, third edition (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 215.

Christians, from Roger Williams, William Penn, and Cecil Calvert in colonial America to Baptist Isaac Backus during the Founding.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, grassroots support during the Founding for ending government subsidies to churches came primarily from within evangelical sects like Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians.<sup>60</sup> These groups thought that tax support of churches corrupted true religion rather than promoted it. It is interesting to note that some of Washington's most passionate statements in favor of religious liberty were written to members of churches who were concerned that the new federal government might use its power to favor one church over another.

To the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, for example, Washington promised that if there were any threat of the federal government violating the rights of conscience, "no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution."<sup>61</sup> He likewise assured Roman Catholics that "as mankind become more liberal they will be more apt to allow that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government."<sup>62</sup>

It was through these letters to America's churches that Washington made his most

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<sup>59</sup> See Anson Phelps Stokes and Leo Pfeffer, *Church and State in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1964), 11-19; Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, revised edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), I: 219-224. Of course, the fact that most supporters of religious liberty in America were Christians does not mean that there were no American defenders of this concept who were hostile to traditional Christianity. Clearly, figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine linked their support of religious liberty to a hostility toward revealed religion. However, they were far from representative of the Founding generation in this area.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the role of evangelicals in arguing against the establishment of religion in Virginia. Thomas Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977); Levy, *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 55-58; Thomas Curry, *The First Freedom: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 143-146.

<sup>61</sup> Washington to the United Baptist Churches in Virginia (May 10, 1789), *George Washington: A Collection*, 532.

<sup>62</sup> Washington to the Roman Catholics in the United States of America (March 15, 1790), *George Washington: A Collection*, 547.

important contribution to the securing of religious freedom under the new Constitution. As the nation's first President, Washington was keenly aware that his acts set precedents for all future federal officials. Therefore, he approached all of his official actions and utterances with great care. By writing to members of various churches as equal citizens, Washington helped to secure for each church the protection of the natural rights proclaimed by the American Revolution.

Perhaps most precedent-setting of all were his letters to Jewish synagogues, the most beautiful of which is likely his letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. Washington wrote them:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection shall demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.<sup>63</sup>

Washington ended his letter with a benediction and a prayer, part of which read, "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." As Harry Jaffa points out, Washington through these words helped ensure that Jews would be

full citizens for the first time, not merely in American history, but since the end of their own polity in the ancient world, more than two thousand years before...From no one else could such a statement about Jews have carried the authority it did carry, when it came from Washington. No one could repudiate these words, once they had come from

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<sup>63</sup> Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport (August 1790), *George Washington: A Collection*, 548.

Washington, without making himself contemptible.<sup>64</sup>

Though Washington was a consistent defender of the rights of conscience, he did not think that the doctrine was unlimited. In his letters to various churches, Washington made a point of stressing the need for church members to obey the government and to fulfill all their obligations as citizens.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, he seemed to make religious liberty for a sect contingent on the good citizenship of its members. To the Quakers he wrote in 1789: “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 the religion, or modes, of faith which they may prefer or profess.”<sup>66</sup> The unstated, but implied, corollary is that when men do not perform their social duties faithfully because of religious objections, they must answer to the government as well as to God.

Of course, this is precisely what worried the Quakers, who were pacifists. They did not want to be persecuted for their refusal to fight during wartime; yet the very connection Washington drew between religious liberty and a religion’s usefulness to the state seemed to invite persecution of religious adherents who could not in good conscience agree with state policy.

But Washington sought to circumvent this conclusion with a caveat. After observing that Quakers are “exemplary and useful citizens” except for “their declining to share with others the burthen of the common defense,” he added: “I assure you very explicitly, that in my opinion the conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness; and it is my wish and desire, that the laws may always be

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<sup>64</sup> Harry Jaffa, “Crisis of the Strauss Divided,” unpublished paper (April 22, 1987), 23, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Washington to General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (May, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 15.

as extensively accommodated to them, as a due regard to the protection and essential interests of the nation may justify and permit.”<sup>67</sup> Ever the gentleman, Washington assures the Quakers that even they merit protection from the government whenever possible, for religious objections to general laws ought to be accommodated as long as they do not contradict “a due regard to the protection and essential interests of the nation...” In this passage one finds a distant anticipation of the “compelling state interest” test employed by the Supreme Court until recently in religious liberty cases.<sup>68</sup>

Washington appears to have applied this same sort of reasoning to the Virginia assessment bill. In a letter defending his initial support for the bill, Washington argued that non-Christians need not be penalized by its provisions because they could “declare themselves Jews, Mahometans or otherwise, and thereby obtain proper relief.”<sup>69</sup> Here again Washington acknowledged the need for religious exemptions to a generally applicable law. Thus, Washington prized religious freedom even above the uniform application of the laws, as long as the “essential interests” of the nation did not dictate otherwise.

Washington’s deep understanding of the role of religion in republican government has much to teach those interested in the interaction between faith and public life in contemporary America. In a time when public morality is discounted and religion’s moral

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<sup>66</sup> Washington to the Religious Society Called Quakers (October, 1789), *George Washington on Religious Liberty*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963); *Gillette v. United States*, 401 U.S. 437 (1971); *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972); *Hobbie v. Unemployment Appeals Commission of Florida*, 480 U.S. 136 (1987). The Supreme Court abandoned this approach for free exercise claims in *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith*, 110 S. Ct. 1595 (1990).

<sup>69</sup> Washington to George Mason (October 3, 1785), *Writings*, XXVIII: 285.

voice often goes unheeded, Washington's defense of the dynamic moral function of religion in civic life needs to be heard by both politicians and religious believers. In a time when many deny that reason and revelation teach the same moral truths, Washington's defense of the natural moral order shows religious believers how they can defend morality without raising the charge that they are merely trying to impose their particular religious dogmas on everyone else. Finally, in a period when expansive government is making it ever more difficult for traditional religious groups to maintain their identity, Washington's defense of religious liberty reminds us of the importance of safeguarding the rights of conscience against unnecessary intrusions by the government. In the realm of religion and civic life, as in other areas, Washington remains an "indispensable man" for our culture today.