



Faiths of Our Fathers Religion and the Presidency from Washington to Obama

The English hymn *Faith of our Fathers*, written in 1849 by Frederick William Faber, celebrates the memory of the Catholic martyrs who perished at the hands of King Henry VIII after his break with Rome following his second marriage to his mistress Ann Boleyn in 1533. The question of faith when applied to America's presidents is a far more complex issue because of the nation's religious pluralism that can be traced back to King Henry's rupture with Rome.

The Historical Waters of Faith

Religion has always played an important role in American history. Religion has been the engine that has driven most of *American Exceptionalism*. At its core was the idea of Massachusetts Bay's John Winthrop, who told his Puritan congregation *we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill with the world watching what they do*.

According to Grove City College history professor Gary Smith, the author of the book *Faith and the Presidency: Religion, Politics, and Public Policy from George Washington to George W. Bush*, the nature of the presidents' faith has been contentiously debated for over a century. Virtually all American presidents have been members of a Christian denomination, with a few Unitarians and a pair of Quakers (Hoover and Nixon) mixed in with Kennedy as the lone Catholic.

While there never has been a Lutheran president, several presidents, such as James Buchanan have aligned themselves with a particular church, but withheld formal affiliation. Since the conclusion of the Civil War, most presidents have been formal members of a particular church or religious body.

What has made it even more difficult to pin down their religious faith is the fact that even though many presidents frequently referred to God and made biblical references, a number never publicly stated what their specific beliefs were, most likely due to political reasons. When explicit statements are absent, it is difficult to assess whether the presidents in question were irreligious, unorthodox, or simply believed that religion was not a matter for the public's knowledge. This has allowed a generation of Marxist historians to muddy the historical waters of religious faith by deconstructing common beliefs about many popular presidents.

An Intellectual Current

One of the great controversies of this debate has been the charge that most of America's early presidents were deists. More a philosophy than a religion, deism held that while the existence of God could be reasoned from nature, an unknowable God created everything, and then just walked away, leaving people to work out their own destinies. As the dominant intellectual current of the 18th century, deism permeated the thinking and debate of America's early leaders especially of its presidents.

While a number of these presidents were sometimes identified as deists, there is no president who proclaimed himself as such. Modern historians have used this lack of definitive proof to speculate that America's founding fathers were not devout Christians and that the United States was not a Christian nation. That debate rages on today. While no one will argue that America was a theocracy in the image Puritan Massachusetts Bay, it is an undeniable fact that America's leaders displayed a profound respect for religion, morality and the recognition of God as their divine creator.

The faith of America's early presidents must be viewed in the context of the country's religious pluralism that emanated from the 1st Amendment of its Constitution. The breadth of the 1st Amendment underscores the fact that Americans were free to choose their religion without government interference in the proper exercise of their freely chosen religions.

An Experiment in Liberty

The religious belief of George Washington is one of the more difficult issues to understand. Washington was enigmatic in his religious faith. This issue has been complicated by the apocryphal writings of Parson Mason Locke Weems. His florid 19th century *Life of Washington* was filled with hyperbolic stories that remained in American textbooks for generations. Washington's heroic feats of tossing a silver dollar across the Potomac and chopping down a cherry tree became the fodder of legends and mythology.

While Washington was a registered member of the Episcopal Church, historians have been clamoring for years that he was a

deist and even a Freemason. Books and photos abound of Washington, wearing his Masonic apron in full regalia. Historian Gary Smith addressed the variance of opinions when he wrote *I think what you can say is he deeply believed in God's providential control of history.*

From reading his papers, Smith concluded *that prayer mattered to Washington, that he was a man who ordered his soldiers to participate in worship services and thanksgiving services for victories during the Revolutionary War.* Smith also said there is *ample evidence* that Washington asked people to pray for him, *which is one reason I think the traditional notion of deism doesn't float.* Smith believes that while Washington *worshipped more frequently at some times than others,* he rarely if ever missed a Sunday during the eight years of his presidency.

Lincoln

The only former president more difficult to grasp than Washington is Abraham Lincoln. During his youth, the religious discord he encountered troubled him his entire life. As a young man he read Thomas Paine's provocative text *The Age of Reason*, and the anti-religious works of 18th century Scottish skeptic David Hume and poet Robert Burns. As a result Lincoln's views on religion favored the Enlightenment and its skepticism of religious belief.

When he became a candidate for public office, Lincoln kept his intellectual and spiritual doubts to himself. The most damning evidence about his lack of Christian faith came from his closest friends, Ward Hill Lamon and his former law partner of 22 years, William H. Herndon. Lamon and Herndon both published biographies of Lincoln after his assassination, denying that Lincoln was a confirmed Christian. Herndon said that Lincoln did not believe in miracles or the efficacy of prayer.

To the contrary, Wheaton College professor Mark Knoll argues that it is obvious that *Christianity exerted a profound influence on his life.* His father was a devout member of the Regular Baptist churches in Kentucky and Indiana. Though Lincoln had occasionally attended the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, when he and Mary moved to Washington he attended service frequently at their church on First Avenue. Lincoln often read the Bible, quoted from it extensively, and frequently used biblical images such as his *House Divided* speech of 1858.

In *Lincoln's Christianity*, Michael Burkholder sees Lincoln as a man who did not believe in orthodox Christian precepts yet personified Christian teachings by his good example while in the White House. It is also one of the great ironies of this debate that Lincoln provided one of the most profoundly religious analyses of the nation's bloodiest trauma in his Second Inaugural Address of March 1865.

Using Old Testament references, he explained that God was punishing all Americans for their role in the calamity with a bloody civil war. The key sentence that captures his speculative view that *it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party---and yet the*

instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purposes.

A Religious Disqualification

Even in this pluralistic nation, some religions virtually disqualify its members from the presidency. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney found this out in 2008 when many conservatives rejected him. His failure to get the nomination is reminiscent of the 1960 election when Senator John Kennedy had to leap hurdles and perform magic tricks to assure his fellow Democrats that his Catholic faith would not make him an agent of the Pope.

Before the Kennedy election only one Catholic, New York's Governor Al Smith, had ever captured his party's presidential nomination. After three ballots, the urbanite Smith, gained the Democratic nomination and then promptly lost the election to Herbert Hoover by six million votes. While there were several other vital issues, the fear that the Pope would dictate policy to Smith was the deciding factor.

During his campaign, Kennedy vigorously attacked his *religious problem.* He met with a group of prominent Houston Protestant ministers in September, securing their blessing after vowing to separate his church from his oath of office. He stated unequivocally that he believed *in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute--where no Catholic prelate would tell the President what to do...* Once in office it became clear that Kennedy did not get his orders from the Vatican. Mitt Romney made his *Kennedy Speech* to quell the doubts about his Mormon faith but unlike Kennedy, it was clear that Romney's religion meant much more to him than Kennedy's.

Wilson and Bush

Arguably the two most religious presidents were Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush. Both of their aggressive foreign policies had a vibrant underlying Messianic fervor that united religion and policy in a way that transcended religion and politics. The son of a Virginia preacher, Wilson developed his elocutionary powers while still a young boy at the pulpit in his father's empty church.

When he became president in 1913 it was not difficult for him to transfer his oratory powers to what his progressive colleague Republican Theodore Roosevelt called his *bully pulpit.* Religious imagery permeated his rhetoric. His Latin America policies became his *Missionary Diplomacy.* When Wilson reluctantly joined the fighting in 1918, the war became his *holy crusade* to make the *world safe for democracy by fighting the war to end all wars.*

While not in Wilson's league, Bush's 1st inaugural in 2001 was laced with Biblical references that indelibly linked American exceptionalism with the messianic diplomacy of the Wilsonian democrats. Author William Sammon emphasizes in his book George Bush was *The Evangelical President*, who labored to *spread a moral democracy throughout the world.*

Bush's Iraqi invasion in 2003 was a Biblical-inspired warning to dictators and terrorists all over the world that the United States was going to eliminate them from the face of the earth. Bush's faith melded religious devotion with a secular plan to liberate Iraq and defeat terrorism. Bush's enthusiasm as a *born again* Christian who saw the war as God's work, has led cynics like author Kevin Phillips to argue that the president was turning the country into an *American Theocracy* for the 21st century.

Both Wilson and Bush believed their religious beliefs transcended politics, giving divine sanction to their *holy wars*. Theirs was akin to Lincoln's purpose with the Emancipation Proclamation linking political expediency with his moral equation. These examples emphasize the fact that religious belief is as much a part of the American character as is motherhood and the American flag. No president can escape it and remain effectively in office.

The Closet of His Soul

Barack Obama's religious faith is even less transparent as those of Washington or Lincoln. His faith is not visibly worn on his sleeve but hides deeply within the closet of his soul. Even with America's pluralist history, Obama's religious background is more diverse than that of most past presidents. Obama's mother came from a household of lapsed Christians while his father was a Muslim who had become an atheist before he married Obama's mother. Her second husband Lolo Soetoro was an eclectic Muslim, who adopted animist and Hindu among his repertoire of beliefs. Given his diverse religious background, it is difficult to understand what Obama truly believes.

It was while Obama was a community organizer working in several poor Chicago neighborhoods in 1988 that he found a religious community where he could meld the tenets of his ideological mentor, Saul Alinsky, with the transforming power of social activism. When Obama joined the Trinity Church of the United Church of Christ, its pastor Jeremiah Wright became the avatar of his Christian faith. The two quickly became friends as Wright performed Obama's wedding and baptized their two children.

Reverend Wright was a dynamic pastor who preached Afrocentric theology, dabbled in radical politics, energized with profanity-laced sermons. It was his propensity for fiery sermons demonizing the United States that eventually led to his swift demise under the Obama campaign bus 20 years later.

Obama's rupture with Wright and his church has led to rampant speculation about Obama's religious faith. Wright's close

relationship with the infamous Louis Farrakhan has stoked the fires of suspicion. Wright's accompaniment with the radical Black Muslim to Libya in 1984 and his high praise of his ministry have cast a darker shadow over Obama's true religious faith. Despite his repeated denunciations of Farrakhan's views, the old question about Obama's ties to Islam linger.

The Muslim Question

Obama's Muslim connections were never fully vetted during the 2008 campaign. When asked to explain his Muslim heritage, he has always replied that his father was from Kenya, and many people in his village were Muslim. In his memoirs *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama was purposefully vague about the details of his beliefs. He repeatedly says that the only connection *I've had to Islam is that my grandfather on my father's side came from that country*. He also emphatically denies that he ever practiced Islam, while living in Muslim Indonesia. While campaigning this was later revised to read that he *wasn't currently* a practicing Muslim.

As a child in Indonesia, Obama attended the Catholic school, Fransiskus Assisi, where documents showed he enrolled as a Muslim through the second grade. While at the state school SDN Menteng 01 in Central Jakarta, in the 3rd and 4th grades he was required to study Islam for two hours each week while other students were at the same time studying Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism. He dismisses these charges by saying that in both schools he didn't pay attention to their indoctrinations and even had the temerity to make faces during Quranic studies and look around the room during Catholic prayers. Obama's childhood friends in Jakarta say that he sometimes went to Friday prayers at the local mosque. According to Muslim tradition his being born to a line of Muslim males made him a Muslim, as does his full name *Barack Hussein Obama*.

Given America's strong religious heritage, the faiths of its presidents are vital to understanding their policies. President Obama's lack of candor about his religion and his appointment of at least two Muslims, Arif Alikhan and Kareem Shora, to the Department of Homeland Security should at least raise a few eyebrows a millimeter or two. The faith of our fathers is often the steam engine that drives the ship of state.



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