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Abstract: The United States is not a theocratic country, yet the importance of, and the emphasis on, religion are a quintessential part of understanding American politics and society. This paper explores the way former presidents of the United States treated and spoke of religion(s) has changed during the history of the nation. In order to discover the role and impact of religion in American history I will analyze a selection of various types of writings of the presidents such as formal letters to Congress or the American people, inauguration remarks, official statements, and other speeches from as early as George Washington to Jimmy Carter.

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Religious Language and the American Presidency

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The United States is not a theocratic country, yet the importance of and the emphasis on religion are quintessential parts of understanding American politics and society. This paper will argue that the way American presidents have used religious language has changed through American History from soft encouragement of religious freedom to a strong stimulus for national unity by surveying the various writings of the American presidents from George Washington to Jimmy Carter.

In the 18th century and early 19th century, presidents of the United States addressed religion deliberately. The language toward religion was tender and careful even though each president had unique ways of addressing it. They mainly focused on religious freedom, how the government should protect the citizens' right to it, and why it was crucial to them.

In a letter to the President of Congress, George Washington emphasized religious freedom and encouraged him to remember "generous toleration" in any religion. In another letter to the Continental Army, Washington carefully ordered the soldiers to keep religious freedom and to dedicate their efforts to "implore the protection of Heaven."¹ Since he had fought in the Revolutionary War for a long time to protect that fundamental human right, he worried that the country could lose it. He also cared to uphold religious freedom for everyone, whether they were Christian or not, to maintain the unity they had gained not long before.

President Washington showed his concern for other religions in meetings with Quakers and Catholics. They worried that Washington's promise of religious freedom only protected Protestantism. In response, Washington delivered a letter to the annual meeting of Quakers in

¹ George Washington to Continental Army, April 12, 1779, in Gaston Espinosa, eds., *Religion and the American Presidency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 76-77.

October 1789 in which he clarified that the freedom of religion was not only a blessing but a civil right. He specifically mentioned that no single denomination was better than another, and that “all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness.”² To the Catholics, he referred to the spirit of Christianity and reminded them that they needed to be faithful, free subjects of this government just as anybody else in the country.

Thomas Jefferson declared in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that forcing one religion over another deprived people of their liberty. Jefferson not only talked about freedom, as Washington did, but also dealt with the violation of freedom. He argued that men could not enforce or restrain religion.³ Jefferson also made a compelling statement that any kind of act that aimed to eliminate this fundamental right “[would] be an infringement of natural right.”⁴ The way President Jefferson asserted the importance of religious freedom influenced his successor, James Madison.

Like Washington and Jefferson, James Madison also worked to ensure that the freedom of religion was secure in the country, but in a slightly distinctive way. When Madison spoke to the people of Virginia in June 1785, he discussed the relationship between the state and religion, which George Washington never did. He highlighted that religion was not going to be, and never had been, the ruling ideology for the government. He added that religion might support the government, and the government might support religion as well, but the country would not establish a theocratic government. Moreover, in a letter to Jasper Adams, who was a clergyman at the time, President Madison further accentuated the importance of recognizing the close relationship between religion and conscience.⁵ Because the government could not control

² George Washington to the annual meeting of Quakers, October 1789, *ibid.*, 80-81.

³ Thomas Jefferson, “The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom,” 1786, *ibid.*, 104-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ James Madison to Jasper Adams, 1832, *ibid.*, 146.

American citizens' consciences, neither could civil authority suppress their right to believe in religion.

In early American history, presidents did not overly emphasize religion. They plainly stated and reiterated the universal truth that Americans had the right to believe in any religion, and no one should enforce it, nor could they take it away. However, as time went by, the tendency changed.

When Abraham Lincoln became president, he delivered his second inaugural address in March 1865 where he directly mentioned God fourteen times and quoted scripture verses from the New Testament four times.⁶ Lincoln's approach to religion differed significantly from that of previous presidents. The entire text more closely resembles a sermon from a preacher than an inaugural speech. Not only did he mention God directly during his first term more than any other president, but he also established his own way of using religious language.

Between 1858 and 1862, Lincoln repeatedly used terms such as "God's will," "God wills," "will of God," and "God's purpose." It was unconventional and unprecedented. He used religion to justify his argument rather than to delicately encourage people to observe and respect the religion of others as George Washington did. President Lincoln directly called the soldiers "Christian soldiers and sailors," and told them that "the divine will demand" that they become more faithful.⁷ In 1862, at a meeting with the army, Lincoln also said that God would be on their side and that meant they would not lose, so the soldiers should keep their heads up and believe God would protect them. This is not how early presidents talked about religion during their presidencies.

⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "The Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, 181.

⁷ Abraham Lincoln to the Army and Navy, November 15, 1862, *ibid.*, 179-80.

Not only did Lincoln's addresses turn into the religious lectures on God, but they also became more extreme. It may have worked for soldiers in the army and navy because such intense language might have motivated them. That was why he chose to speak that way; however, the language was too aggressive and blunt, and it gave precedent for future presidents. Religion was no longer just a constitutional right but a propagandistic tool for promoting nationalism through the Lincoln administration.

Furthermore, Lincoln established the National Fast Day on March 30th, 1863. He said the government was a "government of Almighty God."⁸ Despite the purpose of the address, President Lincoln made use of religion. His remarks involved serious Christian doctrine. Though each president could have their own religious beliefs, it was unimaginable to think that they could speak of and preach a particular religion from a position of such authority. His address was more a religious sermon than a usual address, and the words he used were strong and intense. It was unclear whether he wanted to protect the freedom of religion or wished to convert the whole country. Later presidents were not particularly fond of Lincoln's style.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was in office, he used a more restrained voice than Lincoln whenever he talked about religion, even though Roosevelt still employed strong vocabulary. When Roosevelt gave an address to the National Conference of Catholic Charities in October 1933, he said religion was good for their lives and that God was marching on and helping them to be better. He added that it was a privilege to believe in any religion freely.

It appears that Roosevelt borrowed his style from both Washington and Lincoln. He used more moderate words and tone to give a soft impression about his views on religion rather than

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day," March 30, 1863, *ibid.*, 180-81.

portraying himself as a hard-lined pursuer of religion. From his speeches, it is clear that he found an appropriate balance between strong religious language and soft religious language.

For example, in 1935, when Roosevelt made a statement on the four hundredth anniversary of the printing of the English Bible, he combined the two styles into this remark. First, he deliberately touched on how grateful they were to have such freedom to publish and read the Holy Bible. Then, he said, “we cannot read the history of our rise and development as a Nation, without...the Bible.”⁹ Just as Washington did, he discussed civil and religious freedom and how they related to each other, and using Lincoln’s style, he used the opportunity to stimulate patriotism. He firmly added that America should emphasize the significance of religious freedom more than ever; if they did not talk about it resolutely, then people would attempt to undermine its importance. Furthermore, he said that they needed to uphold this right with an active mind, always ready to fight for it.

In January 1939, just a few months before the outbreak of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his annual message to Congress. He said, “Where freedom of religion has been attacked, the attack has come from sources opposed to democracy.”¹⁰ He used strong religious language to stimulate the American people and to assert pride and confidence. It was not a friendly admonition about the First Amendment, but a political statement that revealed his presidential agenda.

Even though Washington and Roosevelt similarly utilized religion, Roosevelt's statements were political—with a rhetorical purpose—while Washington’s were mere encouragement and friendly admonitions to his fellow workers, citizens, and future successors.

⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Statement on the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Printing of the English Bible,” October, 1935, *ibid.*, 214-5.

¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress,” January 4, 1939, *ibid.*, 215-16.

Regarding the way of addressing religion, there is a clear distinction between the two groups of presidents: one group including Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, and the other group including Lincoln and Roosevelt. What triggered the change between the two groups, and why were they so dissimilar?

First of all, the presidents' timelines, paths, and situations were different. George Washington lived in the late 18th century and witnessed the Revolutionary War. He fought for freedom. The reason his ancestors immigrated to America was to secure autonomy from a tyrannical government. As Washington grew up with the influence of his ancestors, it caused him to focus on securing and protecting fundamental rights. The same principle applied to Jefferson and Madison. They saw people dying while protecting freedom. That certainly made them protective over freedom more than anything else, especially religious freedom because it was part of their identity, purpose, and cause.

In 1789, George Washington wrote a letter to the directors of the Society of the United Brethren. Washington even sent a letter to this small group of people, assuring their freedom by mentioning that the protection of the Union "will be a desirable thing."¹¹ He cared about their freedom and welfare. He showed his intent that everybody deserved freedom and that he would make sure that no one would infringe upon that right. There was no intention of belittling their new religion nor converting them to another religion, only the effort to be cautious and respectful.

Lincoln and Roosevelt, however, were not Founding Fathers. They did not go through the Revolutionary War and experience the early days of America; instead, they had different kinds of wars during their presidency: Civil War and World War II. Lincoln had to step up to prevent

¹¹ George Washington to the directors of the Society of the United Brethren, July 10, 1789, *ibid.*, 79.

the country from splitting into two. The contention between the North and the South was unprecedented. President Lincoln needed religion as a robust tool to reunite the country again. When Lincoln gave his second inaugural address in 1865, he justified the result of the war by discussing the nature of God. "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered."¹² He referred to the Almighty God and His justice that even though both sides had prayed for victory only one side won, and that was what "God wills." He used religion to justify the result of the war and to ease the post-war pain. He could not have accomplished his purpose if he had followed the way of Washington or Jefferson.

Second of all, America maintained Isolationism throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Washington warned the nation to avoid absolute alliances with foreign nations. Therefore, America did not concern with the businesses of European countries; early presidents did not have to rely on religion to unify the nation like Lincoln and Roosevelt. They did not have to stimulate the American citizens' patriotism. It was enough for the early presidents to secure freedom.

Thomas Jefferson said in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, "I shall see with sincere satisfaction... to restore to man all his natural rights."¹³ His language was significantly similar to that of Washington. Like Jefferson, early presidents primarily aimed to ensure that all Americans enjoyed religious freedom. Sending letters to multiple religious affiliations made it possible to achieve national stability, which was invaluable to the new country.

For Lincoln, the problem was reuniting the North and South. With Roosevelt, however, the problem was not just about America, but the world at large. Isolationism was not a priority

¹² Abraham Lincoln, "The Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, 181-2.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association, January 1, 1802, *ibid.*, 106.

anymore. The presidents could not only address domestic issues, since America was becoming more prominent and started engaging more in international affairs. When Franklin Roosevelt delivered the annual message to Congress in 1939, he said, “Where democracy has been overthrown, the spirit of free worship has disappeared.”¹⁴ He targeted Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, where there was no democracy. His purpose was to stimulate national pride in the American people as well as to unify the country to prepare for war.

The presidents after World War II and the Korean War used religious language to promote restoration, identity, and unity. When Dwight D. Eisenhower was in office, he came up with slogans such as “Back to God” and “Under God” to help the nation heal from the wounds of the wars. Eisenhower said in 1954, “America’s freedom, her courage, her strength, and her progress have had their foundation in faith.”¹⁵ The whole purpose of him using religious words was to remind the American people of the great heritage of their ancestors. He declared that faith had been their surest strength and most significant resource. He worked to bring back faith to encourage the American people. Eisenhower used his presidential mantle to invoke the faith of the people and strove to reassure Americans that the government existed to support the citizens and protect their fundamental rights, especially religious freedom.

Furthermore, President Eisenhower did not hesitate to reveal his strong faith. He spoke at the annual breakfast of the International Council for Christian Leadership where he expressed his sincerity that “there is a God and He is more powerful than I, and I am dependent upon Him.”¹⁶ He did not just tell the American people to have faith, but he showed his faith. Not only did he spotlight faith, but he also sanctioned a new policy to insert the phrase “In God We Trust” on the

¹⁴ Franklin Roosevelt to Congress, January 4, 1939, *ibid.*, 215.

¹⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “The American Region’s ‘Back to God’ Program,” February 7, 1954, *ibid.*, 278-9.

¹⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower to the International Council for Christian Leadership, February 2, 1959, *ibid.*, 280-81.

country's currency; this is the second time that a president established a national policy regarding religion—the first being President Lincoln proclaiming the National Fast Day.

In 1946 on Independence Day, President John F. Kennedy gave a speech, “Fundamental religious principles have characterized American thought and action.”¹⁷ As Kennedy talked about faith, he pointed out that religion had lost its quintessential value in American society. Kennedy desired to restore faith and religious principles as part of the American identity. For example, he kept using the word “character” in his addresses. He not only wanted to affirm the importance of religious freedom but also to highlight that religion itself had been a part of American heritage, character, and values. He also placed emphasis on religious value to remind Americans that too many religious intolerances had been happening in America as a form of racial discrimination and religious mistreatment. He wanted the country to remember that America was one nation under God.

President Jimmy Carter showed a similar attitude. In his address to Emory University, in 1979, Carter said that America was “in danger of being torn apart...by religious conflicts.”¹⁸ He further added that America could become one nation only “with the guidance of God.”¹⁹ He cried out for the unity of the nation. Like President Carter, George W. Bush asserted the same idea in his remark to the Jewish Committee in 2001. He talked about the values that Christianity and Judaism shared. He said that it was “not an accident that freedom of religion is the central freedom”²⁰ of all in American society.

Since the 1950s, many presidents have focused on the unity of America through religious values. The 1950s was not an era of Isolationism. As the United States grew stronger than ever

¹⁷ John K. Kennedy, “Independence Speech,” July 4, 1946, *ibid.*, 310-11.

¹⁸ Jimmy Carter, “Remark at Emory University,” August 30, 1979, *ibid.*, 348-49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ George W. Bush to the Jewish Committee, May 3, 2001, *ibid.*, 507-9.

before, the country faced more enemies such as Germany, the Soviet Union, China, and the Middle East throughout the 20th century. The problems that recent presidents faced were not the same as what George Washington or Abraham Lincoln were going through. Because of that, they had various methods of problem solving, leading them to talk about religion differently.

President Eisenhower could not merely focus on the importance of religious freedom. He needed more than that. More recent presidents attempted to use religion to bring America together to fight against enemies all around the world. They needed one America under the same value system. In the Global Era, with the increasing risk of terrorist attacks, the presidents needed to make the country strong to protect national security and American pride. They needed to unite the country to overcome potential dangers. Religion was the key to do so.

Early presidents spoke of religion as a fundamental human right. Their language was of soft encouragement and friendly reminders to the American people. Later, religion became an emblem of victory and patriotism and a tool of justification. Next, religion was a sign of unity, a token of restoration of true American identity, and protection of democracy. Religion was something that could combine the American society. Many presidents knew that and exploited it. Additionally, the United States could not maintain its Isolationism policy after the early 19th century. American presidents realized the need for a stronger spirit as one nation to overcome the increasing danger and threat from foreign affairs. Thus, we see religion becoming an important tool to fortify and build up Americans' confidence and faith in their own nation.

Bibliography

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