

“WASHINGTON IN GLORY”: CLERICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE MAKING OF A NEW NATION

By

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“WASHINGTON IN GLORY”: CLERICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH OF
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Thesis under the direction of Lynn S. Neal, Ph.D., Professor of Religion

This thesis examines the eulogies delivered in honor of George Washington by Christian clerics between December of 1799 and February of 1800. These orations can be viewed as cultural performances that helped to strengthen the social and political order by fostering a sense of community that transcended local boundaries, bringing an entire nation together to mourn their fallen leader. By ruminating on a number of theological as well as political themes, clergymen across the country used their words to help shape the country’s collective identity, defining Americans as set apart by God, republican, and Christian. I argue that this attempt to shape America’s identity was, in part, a negotiation of collective fear that the relatively new American nation would fail. Chapter one examines the eulogists’ participation in the broader tradition of providential thought, casting Americans as having a special relationship with God. Chapter two looks at the clerics’ reflections on leadership in the new republic. Chapter three considers how these clerics used Washington’s death as a way of advocating the Christian religion. Throughout the thesis, I reflect on the idea of an American civil religion and the ways in which these eulogies participated in developing some of its tenets.

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, December 19, 1799, the following note was recorded by the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives:

Mr. Marshall, with deep sorrow on his countenance, and in a low, pathetic tone of voice, rose and addressed the House as follows: The melancholy event which was yesterday announced with doubt, has been rendered but too certain. Our Washington is no more.¹

George Washington, the man whom John Marshall had described as “our Washington,” was gone, having died five days earlier on December 14. Immediately following the announcement, a joint congressional committee went to work planning the appropriate memorial arrangements. Though Washington’s actual funeral took place at Mount Vernon, newspaper reports from the time describe how memorial services were conducted in the cities and towns of every state. These formal ceremonies, recommended by the national government, usually involved a funeral procession made up of the major political and social groups in particular communities, as well as an oration by the community’s political and/or religious leaders.² Of the hundreds of funeral orations delivered in remembrance of Washington, the vast majority were delivered by Christian ministers.³ It is these orations in particular, delivered by the clergy, which will be the focus of this study.

The mourning rituals performed in Washington’s honor can be examined as cultural performances that were designed to appeal to the reason and emotions of both participants and observers. As “cultural metaphors” these observances demonstrated the

¹ Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 91.

² Ibid.

³ Gerald E. Kahler, *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 57.

social structure, beliefs and values of American society at the time. Further, rather than simply mirroring society, these orations were a means of strengthening the social and political order by fostering a sense of community that transcended local boundaries, bringing an entire nation together to mourn their fallen leader.⁴ By ruminating on a number of theological as well as political themes, clergymen across the country used their words to help shape the country's collective identity, defining Americans as set apart by God, republican, and Christian. This attempt to shape America's identity was a negotiation of collective fear in the face of national extinction. Given the Americans' knowledge of history, it seemed a very real threat that the great republican experiment upon which Americans had just embarked would fail.

When Americans sought to put their experience of nationhood in context, many turned to ancient history, specifically to the great republics that had come before them. Their views of antiquity were shaped by the pessimism of the Latin historians, their most readily available sources on these subjects. The fates of Greece and Rome as portrayed in these sources reminded Americans of the frailty of republican governments. Scholar Michael Gilmore argues that reading these cyclical interpretations of history (stories about the rise and fall of nations) "conditioned Americans to believe that their own republic was dangerously close to decay and corruption...Americans could not help but fear for the survival of the republican experiment."⁵ Those fears seemed to be realized in many of the events that unfolded after the Revolution.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ Michael T. Gilmore, "Eulogy as Symbolic Biography: The Iconography of Revolutionary Leadership, 1776-1826," in *Harvard English Studies 8: Studies in Biography*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 141.

When Washington left the office of the presidency, he delivered a farewell address in which he called attention to the difficult times that lay ahead. Addressing the people directly, Washington described his “apprehension of danger,” doubting “the permanency of your felicity as a People.”⁶ During the 1780s and 90s, a number of events unfolded that cast doubt on America’s very survival. Domestically, disorder was seemingly running rampant throughout the country. Economic unrest led to two armed insurrections in less than ten years: the uprising led by Daniel Shays of Massachusetts in 1786, and the Whiskey Rebellion committed by farmers of western Pennsylvania in 1794.⁷ In an attempt to quell further rebellions, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 had been passed, sending individuals to prison for views deemed dangerous to the republic. At the time of Washington’s death, fierce partisanship dominated political discourse as a new presidential election approached.⁸ In general, there was a presumed erosion of respect for social and political authorities. Some believed that the Revolution had allowed ignorant and otherwise unqualified men to aspire to positions of power that would have normally been held by their betters.⁹

Foreign affairs also brought about fears concerning the nation’s future. While many saw the French Revolution as further evidence of the positive change brought to the world by the American Revolution, others saw it as a reminder of the fragility of governments. At the time of Washington’s death, an unofficial war with France, an old ally of the United States, was underway that some felt threatened the very existence of

⁶ Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3.

⁷ Gilmore, 142.

⁸ Nagel, *Sacred Trust*, 5.

⁹ Gilmore, 142.

the United States.¹⁰ Washington himself commented on the nation's precarious situation only a month before his death. He wrote to a friend, admitting that he observed the nation with "an anxious and painful eye." In his opinion, America seemed to be "moving by hasty strides to some awful crisis," whose result "that Being, who sees, foresees, and directs all things, alone can tell." According to Washington, "The vessel is afloat, or very nearly so."¹¹ Washington's death would have seemed like another crisis to a people that had already been tested. As they sought meaning, attempting to calm their fears in the face of this great tragedy, people turned to a well known source of authority, the clergy, as they delivered their funeral orations.

Social scientific literature often talks about the role of communications media in shaping and defining our cultural horizons. Individuals and societies act within a range of choices, which are affected by the amount and types of information they receive. In both the colonial period and early national period of America, the sermons of the Christian clergy provided a means of shaping cultural values, meanings, and a sense of corporate purpose. Often, these sermons were the only regular (at least weekly) means of public communication. As a means of disseminating information, sermons "combined religious, educational, and journalistic functions, and supplied all the key terms necessary to understand existence in this world and the next." As one of the only events that brought people together on a regular basis, these sermons can also be seen as the central ritual of social order and control during both the colonial and early national periods.¹² When

¹⁰ Nagel, *Sacred Trust*, 5.

¹¹ Letter to James McHenry; Quoted in Nagel, *Sacred Trust*, 5.

¹² Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

thousands of people gathered all around the country to listen to the clerical reflections on Washington's death, they were turning to well known sources of authority. The message these clerics delivered would have been especially potent, given the somber nature of the gatherings.

The fact that these orations were delivered in memory of Washington made the clerics' words especially powerful. When one examines eulogies, Gilmore argues, the subject of the memorial is seen less as an individualized figure and functions more as a symbol which has been constructed for the purpose of instructing an audience. In treating the deceased as a kind of cultural ideal, eulogists seek to compose the collective biography of an entire people. Rather than focusing on the dead, the true focus of the eulogy is the speaker and his/her community.¹³ While the expression of solidarity with a community is a general theme of these gatherings, the specific function is related to the needs of the community. Eulogies delivered at the turn of the nineteenth century were similar in form to those delivered during the revolutionary period, but their function had changed immensely.

In the revolutionary era, the clergy delivered many eulogies for fallen patriots. In those statements, they made appeals to Puritan Christianity and classical antiquity in order to justify revolt against Britain. At the turn of the century, however, the country's situation had changed dramatically, as did the function of the memorials that the clergymen conducted. In the early national period, clerics made the same kinds of references they had always made, but with the purpose of legitimizing the newly

¹³ Gilmore, 131.

established American state.¹⁴ The clergy, in general, had switched from an emphasis on rebellion to one of peace and tranquility. They appealed to biblical examples to “reprove ambitious upstarts and to bewail the sins of a restless and seemingly ungovernable people.”¹⁵ Eulogists also used the figures of the founding fathers as symbols of paternal authority. They turned increasingly to biblical models of leadership (e.g., Moses) in order to connect millennial thinking expressed during the Great Awakening to the new American government. As both clerics and lay citizens became increasingly fearful over the fragility of the republic, they turned to the Puritan past to provide a religious sanction to the American nation, thus exempting it from the classical cycle of destruction. Through the appropriation of Puritan eschatological thinking, the American people were increasingly described as the latter-day Israelites; a chosen people to usher in the millennium.¹⁶ As we shall see, Washington’s eulogists participated in this process, using one of the most effective symbols of American unity to further their message.

George Washington functioned as a symbol for Americans in a few different ways. In one sense, Washington was an individual who represented the American character in general. One can see this in a rather well known quote from John Adams before Washington died. Adams noted that:

Instead of adoring Washington, mankind should applaud the nation which educated him. I glory in the character of a Washington, because I know him to be only an exemplification of the American character. I know that the general character of the natives of the United States is the same with his, and the prevalence of such sentiments and principles produced his character and preserved it, and I know that there are thousands of others

¹⁴ Gilmore, 133

¹⁵ Ibid., 143.

¹⁶ Ibid., 149.

who have in them all the essential qualities, moral and intellectual, which compose it. If his character stood alone, I should value it very little.¹⁷

For Adams, Washington's greatness would have been insignificant had he not been placed in the context of being an American. He was, as Representative John Marshall had said, "our Washington," who embodied the best qualities and potential of the people of the United States. We can hear this sentiment echoed in Bishop James Madison's funeral oration which he delivered to his Virginia congregation. For Madison, Washington was not only an illustration of American virtue, but had played a crucial role in "establishing principles, fundamental in social happiness, and which must and will pervade the civilized world."¹⁸ He was a perfect example to follow, as Reverend Aaron Bancroft noted, when he told his congregation that all future civil and political instruction could "be compromised of one sentence, GO, IMITATE OUR WASHINGTON."¹⁹ While Washington represented every American, he was, simultaneously, their leader and a father figure who kept his unruly children in check, protected the country from harm, and accepted their expressions of filial gratitude. Washington had been the founding father who personified the paternal authority of the American government.²⁰ Using Washington as a particularly powerful symbol, these eulogists reflected on the character of the people, and who they would become in the new century.

¹⁷ Paul C. Nagel, *One Nation Indivisible: The Union in American Thought, 1776-1861* (New Yor: Oxford University Press, 1964), 225.

¹⁸ James Madison, *A Discourse, on the Death of General Washington, Late President of the United States; Delivered on the 22d of February, 1800* (Richmond: Thomas Nicolson, 1800), 5. Early American Imprints no. 37876. (Hereafter cited as EAI)

¹⁹ Aaron Bancroft, *An Eulogy on the Character of the Late Gen. George Washington. Delivered before the Inhabitants of the Town of Worcester, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on Saturday the 22d of February 1800* (Worcester, Isaiah Thomas, 1800), 12. EAI no. 36888.

²⁰ Gilmore, 147-148.

About This Study

My goal in this study is to show how clerical reflections on Washington's death shaped a collective identity as a means of combating fears of national extinction. Other studies of these texts have been performed, but they generally limit the clerics' concerns to a single theme, whether it be the comparisons of Washington to Moses, or the clerics' attempts to further Christianize the American people. This study casts a wide net, considering various themes and how they all played an important part in shaping an American identity. Further, by placing the eulogists' words in their historical context, this study can speak to the broader development of an American civil religion that continues to have ramifications today. According to Robert Bellah's conceptualization of American civil religion, Americans assent to a number of beliefs. For example, he argues that Americans embrace the idea that God is actively engaged in history and demonstrates special concern for America.²¹ With God's special attention comes the responsibility of carrying out God's work on earth, thereby providing an example for other nations.²² By portraying Washington and his role in the birth of the nation in a sacred mode, clerics helped to develop these and other tenets of American civil religion according to Bellah's formulation.

Chapter one of this study examines the role of providential thought in the sermons delivered after Washington's death. By providential thought, I mean a mode of discourse that characterizes a nation (in this case America) as being in a covenantal relationship with God. To do this, I provide some historical background about the development of this

²¹ Robert N. Bellah, "American Civil Religion," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96 no. 1 (1967): 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 5, 18.

discourse in the New World and several themes of providential thought are outlined, including the deification of the founders, describing America as a new Israel, and the jeremiad tradition. I then analyze how Washington's eulogists relied on these themes, characterizing Washington as an instrument of God, comparing his life to that of Moses, and equating America with ancient Israel. Throughout the chapter, I reflect on how these statements could have functioned to assuage the fears of citizens at a particularly tenuous time for the country.

Chapter two discusses the clerics' reflections on American leadership. By casting Washington as an ideal republican leader, the eulogists sought to shape the office of the presidency for future generations. According to them, leaders should be both sanctioned by God *and* chosen by the people. Through comparing Washington with archetypal leaders of the Hebrew Bible, the eulogists developed their notions of what a virtuous leader should be. Finally, I examine how these clerics' eulogies reflected the political climate, which involved a contentious battle for the presidency between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Using Washington, these eulogists made arguments for both candidates and two different political philosophies.

Chapter three considers how these clerics used Washington's death as a way of advocating the Christian religion. First, I discuss how Washington was pictured as an ideal Christian. Upon his death, churches were filled with many people who did not normally attend church and clerics seem to have used the opportunity to evangelize. Despite some claims that Washington was not an orthodox Christian, he was universally held up as a virtuous example to be followed by all Christians. Next, I examine the ways in which clerics used the death of George Washington to espouse lessons of religious

improvement to their congregations. Since even the great Washington had succumbed to death, Americans were urged to consider their own eventual deaths and how they would live the rest of their lives. Finally, I draw attention to an interesting conversation within these eulogies about the appropriateness of memorializing Washington in light of prohibitions against idolatry. While some clergy (and other Americans) seem to have been fearful that Washington might be raised to the level of a deity, most argued that their memorials were appropriate and the only truly Christian thing to do.

CHAPTER 1

PROVIDENTIAL THOUGHT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NATIONAL AMERICAN IDENTITY

Introduction

One of the ways in which Washington's eulogists participated in creating an American identity was by viewing Washington's life and death through the lens of Divine Providence. The providential thought of the early national period can be seen as a response to several social and political factors experienced by members of society. For example, it helped temper some of the issues that Americans faced at the time, such as the lack of unity among various cultural elements, including, but not limited to, a number of divided Christian denominations. This providential way of thinking posited a national identity that viewed the entire country as being protected by one all-powerful God, thus providing an important source of union.²³ Additionally, providential thought offered a sense of confidence in the face of forces that threatened to pull the country apart. Remembering past events in which God had intervened, as well as reminding people of God's continuing role in American history, provided a means of combating fears that the country would fail.²⁴

Historical Context

To trace the lineage of providential thought in America, one must look back to the Puritan population of New England during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

²³ John F. Berens, "The Sanctification of American Nationalism, 1789-1812: Prelude to Civil Religion in America," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 3.2 (1976): 184.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

Remembering their journey into the wilderness of the New World and the challenges that came with such an endeavor, these New Englanders saw their history in terms of various chastisements and visitations of God. While God might have challenged and reprimanded them at times, they did not doubt that God was guiding and influencing their development, both spiritual and secular. Puritans developed many of the ideas which became primary in later conceptions of providential thought, including comparing ancient Israel and New England, the deification of mythical founders, the American jeremiad tradition as a way of expressing communal ambitions, linking New England and the beginning of the millennium, and seeing God's role in political, social and military events in New England.²⁵

The Puritans were not the only people of the colonies to think in providential terms. As John Berens rightly points out, other groups have paralleled their development with that of ancient Israel and traced the activities of Divine Providence throughout their history. However, few others have done so as consistently or persuasively as the New England Puritans.²⁶ It was a consistent emphasis on God's role in directing their lives that led them to speak of themselves as being under the *special* guidance of God, seeing themselves as having access to more significant manifestations of divine guidance and chastisement.²⁷ Over time, however, this initially Puritan sensibility became nationalized, shaping the ways Americans would come to define themselves.

²⁵ John F. Berens, *Providence & Patriotism in Early America: 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

These providential concepts would have been first introduced to a wider audience through the intercolonial activity of traveling clergymen, beginning with the First Great Awakening. Moving up and down the east coast, these preachers set up intercolonial associations, drew people into churches, and preached the revival in churches of different denominations.²⁸ While these early intellectual seeds were planted in the late 1730s and early 40s, it was not until the outbreak of war in 1754 that providential thought grew into a truly national philosophy. In what eventually became known to British colonists as the French and Indian War, England and France fought for dominance in North America. During the conflict, the British increasingly used rhetoric focused on their own chosenness. As Protestants, they saw themselves as the agents of Christ fighting Catholic France, the agent of the Anti-Christ.²⁹ Within British responses to contests against the French and their Indian allies, one finds a number of themes that factored into future incarnations of providential philosophy. To begin with, English America was seen as a defender and stronghold of civil and religious freedoms. Further, these freedoms were naturally given by God and had been made manifest only through God's design and providence. Finally, it was because the colonists had defended these rights that God protected its citizens in times of danger. These themes became increasingly mixed with a widespread belief that America was God's new Israel, set apart for the advancement of civil and religious freedom.³⁰

²⁸ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Nationalism and Religion in America: Concepts of American Identity and Vision* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1970), xxiv.

²⁹ Richard T. Hughes, *Myths Americans Live By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 99.

³⁰ Berens, *Providence & Patriotism*, 3.

In this vein, during the revolutionary era, citizens shifted their focus from France to Great Britain as the power most likely to threaten their God-given liberties. By 1775, American clergymen and other orators had separated America's history from that of Great Britain, asking listeners to focus on their relationship with God, the true sovereign, and not on their mother country.³¹ The responsibility to rebel against Britain was seen by the colonists as a command of Divine Providence and the coming American Revolution was cast as the fulfillment of God's plan for the colonies.³² Throughout the war, spokesmen like Simeon Howard of Boston affirmed that their cause was "just in the sight of God and man...a cause which not only directly involves in it the rights and liberties of America; but in which the happiness of mankind is so nearly concerned."³³ One commentator, using the pseudonym "Montanus," wrote to the Virginia Gazette, claiming that "The cause...in which we are embarked, is just. [We] are now standing in defense of those inestimable rights which the King of Heaven has conferred upon all."³⁴

As conveyed by these statements, many Americans came to believe that they were not only fighting for their rights, but for the rights of all of humanity. Many insisted that God had supported this endeavor, and would continue to support it, in order to bring about the reformation of the world. Citizens looked to the events of the war to justify this position. One example that helped secure the idea that God had a hand in military operations took place after the battles of Lexington and Concord. Boston, which had

³¹ Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88.

³² Berens, *Providence & Patriotism*, 3-4.

³³ Simeon Howard, *A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council and the Honorable House of Representatives of the state of Massachusetts-Bay, in New-England, May 31, 1780* (Boston: John Gill, 1780), 40. Early American Imprints no. 16800.

³⁴ Berens, *Providence & Patriotism*, 84.

become a stronghold of the British army, was attacked by ten to fifteen thousand colonial troops. The British position became even more precarious when George Washington himself took command of the operation on July 3, 1775. Washington's strategic use of artillery throughout the winter of 1775-76 led the British troops (as well as several hundred loyalists) to flee the city. Many spokesmen for the patriots characterized this event as an example of divine intervention, thus reinsuring God's blessing of their cause. As he entered Boston with the colonial army, Hugh Henry Brackenridge exclaimed, "The hand of Heaven, is visible in this."³⁵ The greatness of their cause provided the patriots with a sense that the whole world was watching their endeavor. Survival of the American nation would instruct the rest of the world in matters of civil and religious liberties.³⁶ These ideas reassured and inspired those who fought, as God would not let the defenders of those rights fail. Though the colonists would be victorious in their fight against Great Britain, the years that followed would be filled with apprehension about the survival of the new nation.

As has been noted, the period of American history following Washington's inauguration was particularly tumultuous, given the number of domestic and foreign threats facing the country. The very survival of the republic was, in the minds of many citizens, not guaranteed. The strategic construction of American nationalism at this time helped to instill confidence, providing a unique identity as well as hope in the survival of the country.³⁷ A major component of American nationalism continued to be the providential philosophy that had informed much of the colonial past. The success of the

³⁵ Ibid., 67.

³⁶ Ibid., 105.

³⁷ Ibid.

American Revolution had become the most potent symbol of God's concern for America. At the time of Washington's death, the Revolution was a point of reference that was within the memory of almost every citizen. During a time of uncertainty, the Revolution provided an example of a complete victory for America. Americans continued to proclaim that God had intervened in the war because of the rightness of America's cause, namely, "the rights of man."³⁸ Special significance was given to the Fourth of July as a day to remember God's intervention in the American Revolution. Many orations delivered during these celebrations were prefaced with the observation that it was necessary to give praise and thanksgiving to God for the role that God played in victory over the British.³⁹ Here one can see how Americans came to speak of a political victory as a sign of divine intervention.

Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the *habitus* is helpful at this point in seeing how providential thought functioned within early American society. Bourdieu argues that we should not search for rules and constraints placed upon individuals within society. Instead we should investigate the durable and transposable dispositions that function by structuring practices and representations, which can be regulated without being a product of obedience to rules.⁴⁰ This *habitus* is produced from political and economic conditions that people experience within society.⁴¹ Part of the power of the *habitus* is that it has the effect of producing a perceived objective reality that seems to be common sense according to how the world is set up. Those objective structures are

³⁸ Ibid., 174-175.

³⁹ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

⁴¹ Ibid., 78.

internalized and reified by the group.⁴² Additionally, the *habitus* is self-replicating and not the result of a conductor.⁴³ Providential thought typified how a large part of the American population viewed historical events, functioning on its own as people reified past events as evidence that God was controlling America's destiny.⁴⁴

Part of the power of providential thought was that it was self-replicating and, as Bourdieu would point out, collectively orchestrated.⁴⁵ This sanctified nationalism was replicated through many avenues. Stories were told about the Divine Will sustaining the white settlers in times of crisis. The Revolution itself was remembered as a new Exodus for a new Israel, whose mission it was to carry out the great republican experiment and set an example for others around the world. The mythologizing of the Founding Fathers played an important role in this process as well. Especially significant among the narratives told about the founders was the promotion of the idea that George Washington was an instrument of Divine Providence.⁴⁶ This theme, among others, was particularly prevalent in the eulogies that were delivered in Washington's honor.

Upon Washington's death, Thaddeus Fiske of Cambridge, Massachusetts, delivered a eulogy to his congregation that synthesized many of the themes of providential thought that were used throughout the national period. The following passage from this sermon is reproduced here at length, as it provides various examples of

⁴² Ibid., 79.

⁴³ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁴ John F. Berens "“Good News From a Far Country: A Note on Divine Providence and the Stamp Act Crisis.” Church History Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 1976): 315.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 72.

⁴⁶ John F. Berens, "“Like A Prophetic Spirit’: Samuel Davies, American Eulogists, and the Deification of George Washington.” Quarterly Journal of Speech 63 (1977): 291.

how Washington and his country were portrayed in providential terms, thus informing the rest of this chapter.

[Washington] was raised up, by Divine Providence, to espouse the cause of defence, and to become the greatest instrument of delivering us from oppression and bondage, and of giving liberty and independence. And will it be too much for me to say, that the American nation, with their Washington, emancipated and made free and happy by him, shall be handed down to distant prosperity, and perpetuated with as much fame and glory, in the annals of profane history, as the Children of Israel, with their Moses, are celebrated in the sacred writings.⁴⁷

This passage contains three themes that were common to many of Washington's eulogies, and the broader tradition of providential thought. First, it expresses the idea that Washington was chosen by God to further America's success as a republic. Secondly, it compares America to ancient Israel, both having been chosen by God as an example to the world. Finally, it highlights the parallels drawn between Washington and a biblical figure, namely, Moses.

The "Deification" of George Washington

The process of the "deification" of George Washington had already begun during the 1770s and 1780s. Many sermons, orations and newspaper articles proclaimed that Washington had been "raised up" as an instrument of Divine Providence to give victory to the Americans.⁴⁸ Reverend Joseph Buckminster, Jr. proclaimed that Americans could see Washington as "the man, whom heaven designed as the principle instrument of accomplishing, one of the greatest revolutions in the nations of the earth."⁴⁹ Samuel

⁴⁷ Thaddeus Fiske, *A Sermon, Delivered Dec. 29, 1799* (Boston: James Cutler, 1800), 9. EAI no. 37426.

⁴⁸ Berens, *Providence & Patriotism*, 92.

Stillman felt that Washington had been “furnished” by God with “great abilities, and with the most excellent disposition, that he might be a signal blessing to his country.”⁵⁰ This sentiment was quite prevalent in the funeral orations delivered for Washington.

In a sermon delivered in Richmond, Virginia, William Wirt recounted the struggle of the American Revolution and how painful it was for the budding republic. Though it was difficult, Wirt proclaimed, “the God of hosts was on our side and Washington – was his apostle.”⁵¹ John D. Blair echoed this sentiment, saying that Washington was “Raised up by Divine Providence to defend the liberties and vindicate the rights of his country.”⁵² One factor that seems to have helped foster this narrative can be traced back to Reverend Samuel Davies, a prominent Presbyterian minister during the Great Awakening. On August 17, 1755, Davies delivered a sermon to colonial troops who were mustering to defend Virginia from French forces and their Indian allies. His sermon, entitled “Religion and Patriotism, the Constituents of a Good Soldier,” called for courage in battle, picturing the recruits as the flames of a martial fire that God was lighting throughout America.⁵³ When Davies prepared the sermons for publication, he added a footnote, which stated that,

As a remarkable instance...I may point out to the public, that heroic youth,
Col. Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto

⁴⁹ Rev. Joseph Buckminster, Jr., *A Discourse, Delivered at Portsmouth, New-Hampshire, November 1st, 1789* (Portsmouth, 1789), 6. EAI no. 21718.

⁵⁰ Samuel Stillman, *An Oration, Delivered July 4th, 1789* (Boston: Edes, 1789), 21. EAI no. 22165.

⁵¹ William Wirt, *An Oration Delivered in Richmond on the Fourth of July, 1800* (Richmond: Meriwether Jones, 1800), 12. EAI no. 39124.

⁵² John D. Blair, *A Sermon on the Death of Lieutenant General George Washington* (Richmond: Meriwether Jones, 1800), 8. EAI, no. 36983.

⁵³ George William Pilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1971), 166.

preserved in so signal a manner, for some important service to his country.⁵⁴

Seeing how this “prophecy” was used by Washington’s eulogists provides insight into how crucial providential thought was to American nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Of the nearly 400 surviving eulogies, thirty-one (about eight percent) make direct reference to Samuel Davies’ prophecy. While this may not seem like a large percentage, it is significant that these speeches were delivered in eleven states by eulogists who represented almost every major Protestant denomination in the country. Additionally, they were delivered almost half of a century after the original sermon by Davies. Further, two-thirds of the eulogists were not Presbyterian (Davies’ denomination) lending credence to the theory that strong interdenominational contacts had developed by 1800.⁵⁵ The widespread use of the prophecy in these eulogies suggests that this part of Washington’s legend had national appeal. By affirming this prophecy, these eulogists made use of Washington as a national symbol of strength and leadership, which could have the effect of bringing people of different religious and cultural dispositions together.

In addition to commenting on the character of Washington, many eulogists used Davies’ sermon to highlight God’s providential protection of the United States. The Congregationalist minister, Eliphalet Gillet of Maine, recounted Davies’ sermon, exclaiming,

Glorious prophecy! And still more gloriously fulfilled!...We have been long and highly favored of HIM, ‘by whom kings and princes decree justice.’ ‘He hath not dealt so with any nation. Praise ye the Lord’.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Berens, *Prophetic*, 292.

Making references to Proverbs 8: 15 and Psalms 147: 19-20 respectively, Gillet took this supposed fulfilled prophecy to be a sign that God held America in special favor over other countries. This notion, that the country was protected by God, could have tempered anxiety over the danger of national extinction.

America: The New Israel

The idea of America's special protection by God goes hand in hand with the affirmation that many eulogists made, casting America as a new Israel. The practice of comparing America's citizens to the nation of Israel can be traced back to the Puritans' emphasis on typology, allegorically reading the Old Testament. Dating back to the early Christian Fathers, this practice saw most patriarchs and prophets as precursors, or "types," of Christ, just as the Hebrew nation was a type of the later Christian Church, Moses was seen as a type of the later messiah, and so on. Puritans continued this practice, seeing the exile of the Jews into the wilderness as a precursor to the exile of Protestants as they fled the Catholic Church. They considered Israel's flight from Egypt to be a precursor of the Puritans' movement to the New World. The concept of America as a New Israel, derived from the religious typology practiced by the Puritans, informed later ideas about an American Israel that were expounded upon during the revolutionary period.⁵⁷ This language helped reassure citizens that, just as the Lord protected Israel during times of crisis, God would also protect the new republic.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Eliphalet Gillet, *An Oration, Delivered January 8, 1800, Before the Citizens of Hallowell* (Hallowell: Peter Edwards, 1800), 18. EAI no. 37516.

⁵⁷ Berens, *Providence & Patriotism*, 16-17.

Many of Washington's eulogists replicated this parallel, assuring the American people of their connection to ancient Israel and their destiny of success. As Thaddeus Fiske told his parishioners, Washington had performed on behalf of "this American Israel."⁵⁹ He further claimed that the American nation:

shall be handed down to distant posterity, and perpetuated with as much fame and glory...as the Children of Israel...are celebrated in sacred writings.⁶⁰

For many eulogists, America's future success was intrinsically related to its protection of civil liberties. For example, Reverend Ariel Kendrick told the citizens of Boscawen, New Hampshire, that, "America seems to have been marked out by God himself as a place where to bestow his glorious goodness in the communication of those blessings which are suited to the social and civil state of man, particularly liberty and freedom."⁶¹ For Kendrick, it was *because* of this special mission that "the interpositions of Heaven in favor of our country have astonished many of the human race." Because God cared about this mission, God had "crowned the enterprise with success" from the beginning.⁶² John Elliot espoused a similar view when he said that, "God hath designed this land for many important purposes of his glory and the good of mankind." God's actions, which included

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Fiske, 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ariel Kendrick, *An Eulogy on General George Washington, Delivered at the West Meeting-House in the Town of Boscawen, on the 22d of February, 1800* (Concord: George Hough, 1800), 6. EAI no 37723.

⁶² Kendrick, 6-7.

supplying the nation with a great leader, were seen as “standing testimonies and evident presages that auspicious and extensive designs are yet in the womb of time.”⁶³

However, not all uses of the comparison with ancient Israel sounded particularly hopeful. Reverend Dr. Nathanael Emmons, a Congregationalist minister in Franklin, Massachusetts, warned those gathered in his church of the danger their country faced now that Washington had been taken from them. Comparing their situation to that of ancient Israel, Emmons stated that:

After the death of Joshua and of the elders that outlived him, the people fell into licentiousness, anarchy, and confusion, from which they never recovered, until the days of David. Solomon was a prince of peace, and raised the nation to the summit of earthly glory; but his death divided the kingdom, and threw the twelve tribes into all the horrors and miseries of civil war; the fatal consequences of which remain to this day. When a pillar of the state is taken away, it never fails to weaken or unsettle the whole frame of government.⁶⁴

Emmons felt that the loss of Washington had weakened their country in the eyes of Britain, France and every other nation. Despair was justified as “our national strength, no less than our national glory, is diminished.”⁶⁵ The fact that God had chosen to remove Washington at such a delicate time in the nation’s history seemed particularly damning. He noted that, “The decease of the Friend and Father of our country would have been, at any time, a public calamity; but at this dark and distressing day, it is a peculiar frown of Heaven.”⁶⁶ This turn of events was, for Emmons, a guarantee that God was about to visit judgment upon the American people “for their ingratitude, and abuse of public

⁶³ John Elliot, *A Discourse, Delivered on Saturday, February 22, 1800* (Hartford: Hudson & Goodwin, 1800), 16-17. EAI no. 37353.

⁶⁴ Nathanael Emmons, *A Sermon on the Death of General George Washington* (Wrentham: Nathaniel and Benjamin Heaton, 1800), 16. EAI, no. 37369.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

blessings.” Emmons added that God, “often took away from the house of Israel their greatest and best men, as a prelude to a series of national calamities.”⁶⁷ Emmons concluded his sermon by pleading with his fellow Americans to turn back to the God that they had forsaken. The best way to accomplish this was to imitate Washington. The youth were told to despise the vanities that Washington despised. Those in military service were to display the kind of courage Washington had exhibited in battle. The wealthiest members of society were to be charitable as Washington had been. He concluded that, “Whoever wishes to be eminently useful in any private employment, or public station, let him think, and act, and live like Washington.”⁶⁸

Emmons funeral oration is a good example of another aspect of the providential tradition of America, namely, that of the jeremiad. Sacvan Berkovitch, in his seminal work *The American Jeremiad*, defines this phenomenon as a political sermon; what he calls a “state of the covenant” given at public gatherings, particularly on days of prayer and fasting, days of thanksgiving, covenant renewal gatherings and election days. The general themes touched on in these sermons were the people’s false dealings with God, the degeneracy of the young, betrayal of covenant promises, the lure of material wealth and pleasure, and the very real prospect of God’s swift judgment for those offenses.⁶⁹ This ritual was brought from Europe by the Puritans, who gave it a uniquely American character. In Europe, the jeremiad only related to “mundane, social matters.” It did not call for conversion, but moral obedience and civic virtue. The Puritans’ version of the jeremiad, however, was a combination of sacred and secular history, delivered with the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁹ Sacvan Berkovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 4.

purpose of directing those who had fallen away from God toward “fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.”⁷⁰

Berkovitch contends that the American jeremiad was a ritual designed to connect social criticisms to spiritual renewal, placing historical and current events into the context of traditional metaphors, themes and symbols.⁷¹ Rather than appealing to a traditional ideal in the past, it looked toward a vision of an ideal future. This idyllic “New World” would be the fulfillment of God’s plan, which no other people on earth had fully actualized.⁷² By using the idea of God’s disappointment that the people had not yet reached the goal, the jeremiad promoted the inevitability of God’s success and, therefore, the success of the colonial cause.⁷³ By creating a climate of anxiety, the ritual helped to release the kind of energy necessary to complete the project of building this New World. The state of anxiety created by its recitation was a way of making real the unfulfilled nature of the world in which they lived. Clergymen made use of the jeremiad to sustain the process of moving toward fulfillment by imposing control, justifying that control by presenting a certain mode of being as the only road to the future kingdom.⁷⁴

Emmons’ oration continued this tradition, interpreting Washington’s death as a warning; the precursor to immanent divine judgment. Only by coming back to God could the nation hope to weather the coming trials, in the form of foreign and domestic

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷¹ Ibid., xi.

⁷² Ibid., 23.

⁷³ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

uprisings. Emmons' prescription for entering back into God's favor was for the citizenry to imitate Washington's virtues to the best of their abilities. Washington had become a symbol of righteousness around which people could rally. This would have helped solidify their resolve to continually create the republic that Washington had fought to create and preserve. Only by focusing on and imitating the symbol of Washington would Americans fulfill God's plan for his chosen people.

American Moses

A final way in which these eulogies can be seen as participating in the tradition of providential thought is found in the comparison of Washington to biblical figures; most especially Moses. The Washington-as-Moses analogy seems to have been most fully developed in New England, by those with a Puritan religious heritage and Federalist political leanings. They cast themselves as an Old Testament people with a covenantal relationship with God, who had raised up this American Israel as an example to the rest of humanity.⁷⁵ As Robert P. Hay argues, George Washington's life and death were purposely formatted into this religious motif, thus enabling these citizens to understand their place in history.⁷⁶ Many of the eulogies contain references to this connection, claiming that, as Thaddeus Fiske said, Washington "has been the same to us as Moses was to the Children of Israel."⁷⁷ In fact, some of the most frequently used biblical texts in Washington's eulogies were from the thirty-fourth and final chapter of Deuteronomy,

⁷⁵ Robert P. Hay, "George Washington: American Moses," *American Quarterly Journal* 21.4 (1969): 789.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Fiske, 9.

which describes the death of Moses and the reaction of the people of Israel.⁷⁸ Timothy Dwight, president of Yale and Congregationalist minister, opened his eulogy by quoting Deuteronomy 34: 10-12, saying, “And there arose not a prophet since Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.”⁷⁹ Many eulogists compared Americans to the ancient Israelites who cried in the plains of Moab as they mourned Moses. Fiske’s eulogy picked up on this imagery, stating that,

Scarcely less sorrowful is the occasion, or less afflictive the death now felt and deplored by this American Israel. The Children of Columbia now weep for Washington in the plains of America.⁸⁰

Many of the eulogies drew explicit parallels between the lives of Washington and Moses. For example, both men were born of simple but worthy parents and were brought to maturity in the wilderness.⁸¹ They were both seen as successful military leaders. As Alexander MacWhorter explained, “Moses was the greatest and most successful general in remote antiquity; so Washington has been the most eminent, the most prosperous, and the most honored general in modern times.”⁸² Both men had dealt with foreign enemies as well as traitors from among their compatriots. As Peter Folsom noted,

The Israelites had murmurers, who complained, and found fault with their commander – Had not Washington the same difficulties to encounter? Yea, worse, he had *tories* and *traitors* – Did not many of the Israelites revolt and forsake the worship of the true God? Have we not deists and atheists among us?⁸³

⁷⁸ Hay, 782.

⁷⁹ Timothy Dwight, *A Discourse, Delivered at New-Haven, Feb. 22, 1800* (New Have, Thomas Green (1735-1812) and Thomas Green (1765-1825), 1800), 5. EAI no. 37339.

⁸⁰ Fiske, 9.

⁸¹ James Smylie “The President as Republican Prophet and King: Clerical Reflections on the Death of George Washington” *Journal of Church and State* 18 (Spring 1976): 239.

⁸² Alexander MacWhorter, *A Funeral Sermon, Preached in Newark, December 27, 1799* (Newark: Jacob Benton Halsey, 1815), 10. EAI, no. 37875.

Like Moses, Washington's station had been "assigned by the Creator and Governor of the universe."⁸⁴ Both men were seen as "legislators;" Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to the Israelites and Washington had been instrumental in establishing the guiding principles of the Constitution.⁸⁵ Moses had freed the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt, while Washington was the "deliverer from the bondage and tyranny of haughty Britain."⁸⁶ Moses brought Israel to the Promised Land and Washington delivered his countrymen to the promised land of independence.⁸⁷

On this last point, some even argued that Washington had been superior to Moses in that Washington had actually reached the promised land with his fellow citizens. Peter Folsom said that it was right to compare the two great men, but with a caveat. "Moses conducted the Israelites in sight of the promised land; but, WASHINGTON has done more, he has put the Americans in full possession."⁸⁸ The same sentiment is found in a sermon delivered by Frederick Hotchkiss, in which he stated that:

The American leader also ascended the mount [Mount Vernon] to die, but while yielding his last breath, he saw his country's glory finished. The former dies on a mount of vision and hope, but the other on a mount of possession and enjoyment.⁸⁹

⁸³ Peter Folsom, *An Eulogy on Geo. Washington, Late Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States of America* (Gillmanton: Russell, 1800), 6. EAI, no.37432.

⁸⁴ James Wilson, *Substance of a Discourse; on Divine Providence, in Special Reference to the Memory, Character, and Death of the Late Gen. George Washington* (Providence: Wheeler, 1800), 3.EAI, no. 39116.

⁸⁵ Folsom, 6.

⁸⁶ Isaac Braman, *An Eulogy on the Late General George Washington, Who Died, Saturday, 14th December, 1799* (Haverhill, Mass.: Moore, 1800), 5. EAI, no. 37036.

⁸⁷ Hay, 785.

⁸⁸ Folsom, 6.

⁸⁹ Frederick William Hotchkiss, *Mr. Hotchkiss's Oration on the Death of General George Washington* (New London: S. Green, 1800), 11. EAI, no. 37651.

Others noted that while Moses was divinely inspired by God, Washington had to rely on his own physical, mental and spiritual resources without the luxury of direct inspiration.⁹⁰ Ideas such as these must have been what led Eli Forbes to reverse the comparison, declaring that Moses was “the Washington of Israel.”⁹¹

Casting Washington as a new Moses could have functioned as a means of strengthening American nationalism in a few important ways. In one sense, it helped satisfy the nation’s need for a common father figure under which disparate portions of the nation could unify, thus making Washington central to a myth of providential guidance and union.⁹² As Thaddeus Fiske noted, Washington’s role as an American Moses was, in part, “to espouse the cause of freedom, [and] infuse into our breasts the indivisible love of country.”⁹³ In addition, it gave people a sense that Washington’s career, and American history in general, had been directed by the Divine Will, thus ensuring the success and protection of the republic. Additionally, it helped those who heard these sermons as well as those who delivered them cope with the loss of their leader, finding security in the idea that if God had chosen to take their American Moses, God would also preserve subsequent leaders of America.⁹⁴ As another one of the eulogists hoped about Washington’s successor,

⁹⁰ Hay, 788.

⁹¹ Eli Forbes, *An Eulogy Moralized, on the Illustrious Character of the Late General George Washington, Who Died on Saturday, the 14th Day of December, 1799. Delivered at Gloucester, on the 22nd of February, 1800* (Newburyport: Edmund M. Blunt, 1800), 14. EAI, no. 37433.

⁹² Berens, *Sanctification*, 178.

⁹³ Fiske, 9.

⁹⁴ Hay, 789.

May [John] Adams as nearly equal Washington in the grand Council of our Nation, as Joshua did Moses in the camp of Israel.⁹⁵

Conclusion

From the texts available to us today, it seems that Washington's eulogists participated in a larger tradition of providential thought that guided the way many Americans conceptualized their collective identity. Claims that Washington had been an instrument of God, the comparison of America's mission to that of ancient Israel, and the links developed between Washington and biblical figures such as Moses were not simply literary embellishments. Instead, they served the important function of reassuring those that were exposed to and reproduced these symbols that, despite very real threats to the security of the nation, their leaders would be divinely guided to the right decisions.⁹⁶ As Bellah points out, while biblical archetypes and language factored into America's civil religion, these ideas were uniquely American, used to create new sacred events and symbols.⁹⁷ Assurances that the American people were special in their mission, and unique in their divine favor, helped Americans unify and cope with the myriad threats facing their survival. Because of the roles he held, as both a warrior for his country and its preeminent statesman, the use of Washington as a symbol of America's continued success was especially potent.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Kendrick, 16.

⁹⁶ Berens, *Sanctification*, 179.

⁹⁷ Bellah, 18.

⁹⁸ Berens, *Sanctification*, 179.

CHAPTER 2
CLERICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF POWER: SHAPING THE AMERICAN
PRESIDENCY

Introduction

In the opening prayer of his oration on the life and death of George Washington, William Rogers, president of the University of Pennsylvania, referred to God as the “Governor of all worlds! King of kings and Lord of lords! Who livest and reignest for ever!”⁹⁹ God was certainly seen as the highest of all authorities, ruling over the cosmos with wisdom since time immemorial. The role of the American president, on the other hand, was a very new position of power and was still in the process of being defined. There were many questions about what it meant to be a good president, as well as the very process of choosing an individual for the office. At the time of Washington’s death, a new party system as well as a new electoral process were both in development, neither of which had been proven as the best means to choose new leaders for the country. For many of the eulogists, Washington’s legacy provided an opportunity to have a conversation about what leadership should be in the young republic. James H. Smylie argues persuasively that by representing Washington as an ideal type of republican leader, these clergymen were helping to establish a “standard republican leadership against which Washington’s successors might be evaluated.”¹⁰⁰ By reflecting on the nature of leadership, these eulogies helped combat fears that their leaders would prove ineffective at leading the nation into the new century.

⁹⁹ William Rogers, *The Prayer, Delivered on Saturday the 22d of February, 1800, in the German Reformed Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Ormrod, 1800), 3. EAI no. 38419.

¹⁰⁰ Smylie, 251.

In this chapter, I first discuss the balance struck by the eulogists in describing Washington's leadership as both inspired by God and chosen by the people. Washington, as opposed to the monarchs of Europe, did not become president as a result of being anointed so by God. Instead, God created the conditions necessary to produce a man that the people would recognize as having the right qualifications for the job. Washington was not appointed by God, but was given the tools necessary for the job. Ultimately, Washington's ascension to power was the result of the faith his compatriots placed in him, electing him through the republican process they themselves had established. I then show how clerics shaped their vision of a good leader by comparing Washington to the kingly figures of the Hebrew Bible. Washington was right for the job because he exhibited the best virtues of the ancient leaders with which the audiences would have been familiar. Finally, I demonstrate how partisan politics played out in the eulogies as clerics picked sides in the upcoming presidential election. By making use of Washington, the eulogists let their opinions be known as to which party, the Federalists or the Republicans, represented the best hope for their country in the new century.

Provided by God; Chosen by the People

One of the critical features of Washington's leadership, as has been discussed, was that it was provided by God. One of the ramifications of casting Washington's presidency in this light was that it would instill a sense of comfort in the citizens upon losing their first president. Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister in New York, took the occasion of Washington's death to preach on 1 Chronicles 29: 12-13, which he reproduces, saying, "From thee, O Lord, both riches and honours come; and in thine hand

is power and might, and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be the glory!” According to Miller, when people such as Washington, who have been brought to such high distinction and made useful to the world, are taken away, “we are taught by this doctrine, not to indulge in anxiety or despair. The same God who raised them up, who girded them with strength, who inspired them with wisdom, and who fitted them for the sphere in which they moved, still lives, and will forever live.” According to God’s pleasure, God will qualify others to take their places. God possesses a wise plan for every eventuality with instruments prepared to do his will. Miller comforted the congregation, saying, “Brethren, how consoling the thought that we live under the government of such a God.”¹⁰¹

Other eulogists shared these sentiments. Alexander MacWhorter told his audience in the First Presbyterian Church of Newark, New Jersey, that there was no need to worry. He encouraged them to:

maintain an unwavering immovable confidence, and firm trust in that God who never dies; - in his wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and all his adorable perfections;-and in certain rectitude, supreme equity, and immutable excellence of his government.

MacWhorter promoted the idea that, if the American people placed their trust and hope in God, God would continue to deliver individuals like Washington to “be our leaders, guardians and defenders” as long as “suns and moons shall endure.”¹⁰² Richard Furman, pastor of the Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, assured his congregation that, “America will remain the object of divine care and favor.---If, therefore, one honored agent is removed, another will be raised up to fill his place; to catch, as it were, his

¹⁰¹ Samuel Miller, *A Sermon, Delivered December 29, 1799; Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington* (New York: Swords, 1800), 24-25. EAI no. 37964.

¹⁰² MacWhorter, 22.

mantle, imbibe his spirit, and stand forth, under God, the guardian of our lives, liberties and laws.”¹⁰³

While the eulogists were clear that Washington was an instrument of God and his presidency was the result of God’s will, they were also clear that leadership is rightly gained not by divine appointment, but through the abilities one possesses and the content of one’s character. John Mason told the congregation of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City that God, whose kingdom rules over all, “prepares from afar the instruments best adapted to his purpose.” Through God’s influence, God stirs the spirits of soldiers and statesmen alike. Among all of the heroes who had appeared from obscurity and sprung into action, there was one man “it were almost presumption to expect; but such a man all-ruling Heaven had provided, and that man was Washington.” While it is God who calls Washington and others into action, Mason is clear that it was up to Washington to answer. Mason writes that the people upon which God “bestowed the elements of greatness, are brought, by his providence, into contact with exigencies which rouse them to action.” It was the life experience of Washington and others that constituted the necessary ingredient to their heeding the call. The whirlwind of political and military strife had uncovered “the fire of genius, and kindle[d] it into a blaze.”¹⁰⁴

Samuel Miller echoed Mason’s sentiment that, while Washington had been raised up by God, he possessed the qualities of leadership that befitted such appointment. Miller affirmed that when God chooses to call upon a great man such as Washington, God

¹⁰³ Richard Furman, *Humble Submission to Divine Sovereignty the Duty of a Bereaved Nation* (Charleston: Young, 1800), 16. EAI no. 37484.

¹⁰⁴ John Mitchell Mason, *A Funeral Oration, Delivered in the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New-York, on the 22d Day of February, 1800* *A Funeral Oration, Delivered in the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New-York, on the 22d Day of February, 1800* (New York: Hopkins, 1800), 5-6. EAI no. 37902.

“disposes occasions and incidents in a proper train for the purpose.” God designs these events to “operate on the mind of the future hero; and the mind of the hero again, by a kind of moral reaction, to give increasing greatness and interest to the scenes in which he participates.” The time into which people are born, along with their education, the company they keep, and the events of their lives all help to strengthen a person’s character.¹⁰⁵ As for Washington, his mind was of a “high order.” God had set the course of Washington’s life so that he would “move in a sphere in which a dignified prudence, soundness of judgment, firmness, self command, and uniformity, were especially needful; and therefore, these were the leading features of his character.”¹⁰⁶ Miller focuses strongly on Washington’s character as defining his ability to lead. He goes on to say that Washington was a true leader not as the result of the “tinsel ornament of titled nobility,” for he came into this world “without the advantage of what is called distinguished and honourable birth.”¹⁰⁷ Reflections such as these, which focus on Washington’s ability to lead, partially illustrate a tendency of the eulogists to differentiate between the republican leadership of Washington and the monarchs of Europe.

Many Americans rebelled against the prevailing image of what it meant to hold power in Europe. Monarchs, like the king of Great Britain, were seen as holding power through divine appointment or through hereditary lines. Leadership was not based on merit, but on lineage and divine authority. The new American nation was experimenting with republican leadership, and Washington was the personification of that experiment. He had not been anointed as president by an ecclesiastical authority, nor had he been

¹⁰⁵ Miller, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

chosen as the result of his lineage. Power had been entrusted to Washington through a Constitution that had been created by the people. The Constitution was clear that there should be no religious test for those seeking the presidency, nor should titles of nobility be issued. Washington was elected to office by his fellow citizens, who were in turn enacting God's will.¹⁰⁸ As John Carle of Rockaway, New Jersey, noted, "Washington was chosen by the people and succeeding events have abundantly manifested that Heaven approved and ratified the appointment."¹⁰⁹ Aside from Washington specifically, God approved of this republican model of leadership as differentiated from the monarchical system of Europe.

For the eulogists, Washington was the antithesis of the monarchs of Europe, whose power was based on the "vain baubles of Heraldry, the Escutcheon, the Star or the Garter."¹¹⁰ Both in the way he came into power and in his demeanor once he possessed power, Washington was the embodiment of republican leadership. Reverend Patrick Allison told those gathered in the Presbyterian Church of Baltimore that, despite the applause and accolades that followed Washington wherever he went, "no assuming airs of consequence, no displays of self-importance, no indications of insolence marked a single word from his mouth, or action of his life."¹¹¹ Samuel Knox, a Presbyterian minister who had left Ireland in 1795 for America, spoke with authority on this matter as

¹⁰⁸ Smiley, 235-236.

¹⁰⁹ John Carle, *A Funeral Sermon, Preached at Rockaway, December 29, 1799, on the Much Lamented Death of General George Washington* (Morristown: Mann, 1800), 13. EAI no. 37101.

¹¹⁰ Samuel Knox, *A Funeral Oration Commemorative of the Illustrious Virtues of the Late Great and Good General Washington* (Frederickstown: Bartgis, 1800), 4. EAI no. 37742.

¹¹¹ Patrick Allison, *A Discourse, Delivered in the Presbyterian Church, in the City of Baltimore, the 22d of February, 1800* (Baltimore: Pechin, 1800), 19. EAI no. 36802.

he had just left behind the rule of European governments.¹¹² He described European despots as those who were “either born themselves; or were instigated by those who were born, nurs’d and rear’d on the lap of hereditary pride and Monocracy.” These so called men of distinction were “employ’d in tearing down one system of Empire or tyranny, only, to gratify their own ambition in erecting one still more absolute or despotic.” Juxtaposed to these leaders were those who, like Washington, had been formed by Divine Providence for “the public weal, have, in general, been raised from the humble and most virtuous grade in society, on the solid basis of personal merit, and the uncorrupted principles of the most pure and disinterested patriotism.”¹¹³

According to Samuel Knox, it was precisely because of Washington’s humble beginnings and gracious demeanor as a leader that there had been such an outpouring of emotion upon his death. As he asked, “Where has been the Emperor, King, Prince or Potentate the memory of whose worth was embalm’d by the pure and voluntary effusion of a whole assembled nation’s tears?” The memorial which was taking place for Washington was a testimony to “how far republican gratitude transcends the ostentatious blazonry of all the funeral pomp, in which the useless hereditary despot is configured to dust and oblivion.”¹¹⁴ In statements such as these, we can see how these eulogies were part of a negotiation of the nation’s identity as a republic by contrasting it with the old ways of Europe. The monarchical tendencies of many of the early Americans aside¹¹⁵,

¹¹² Smylie, 237.

¹¹³ Knox, 3-4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁵ Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert eds., *Launching the Extended Republic: The Federalist Era* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 7.

these statements helped solidify the rightness of the republican experiment which Washington had helped inaugurate.

Old Testament Models of New Republican Leadership

As has been previously mentioned, the eulogists often drew parallels between Washington and leaders from the Hebrew Bible, such as Moses, David, and so on. In addition to basic comparisons, many eulogists drew parallels between their personal virtues; virtues which seem to be ideal for those in positions of leadership.¹¹⁶ In the town of Rockaway, New Jersey, John J. Carle delivered a sermon in which the major theme was the comparison of Washington to Moses, in both outward similarities as well as dispositions. Carle noted that neither of these great men were ambitious, pointing out the resemblance in how both accepted their offices. “Diffidence,” Carle stated, “in their own abilities to accomplish such great and arduous undertakings, which always accompanies real greatness, was expressed by them both.”¹¹⁷ Jedidiah Morse reminded his listeners that Washington, like Moses, took up his commission only after much persuasion and support from God.¹¹⁸ Smylie points out that many Americans, having just thrown off the yoke of a monarch, viewed those who had or sought power with suspicion. The idea that Washington had reluctantly accepted the office of the presidency would have been comforting to clerics and the general population alike.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Hay, 786.

¹¹⁷ Carle, 13-14.

¹¹⁸ Jedidiah Morse, *A Prayer and Sermon, Delivered at Charlestown, December 31, 1799; on the Death of George Washington* (Charleston: Etheridge, 1800), 24. EAI no. 37121.

¹¹⁹ Smylie, 241.

Equally important in a leader was the quality of self-restraint in exercising power. Carle demonstrated this by comparing Washington's demeanor to the meekness of Moses. Even though Moses was "a man of like passions with other men," there were only a few instances in which he yielded to the government of those passions. Likewise, Washington's patience had been tested, "yet he was equally calm and tranquil. It is said that he was naturally passionate; but, from his youth, he so governed his passions, as very seldom to discover them at all."¹²⁰ While both men were quite passionate, they had not let those passions dictate how they used their power. Neither Washington nor Moses let anger overtake them when dealing with their countrymen, who accused them of wrongdoing. As Carle points out, Washington could be compared to Moses on account of the "meekness – firmness, and tranquility with which he bore the reproaches of those for whom he hazarded his life, and devoted his talents." The children of Israel constantly spoke out against Moses, but Moses dealt with them with patience. Even though Washington had "pursued the wisest measures that could have been adopted, in his circumstances, he was reproached as traitorous, cowardly, and deficient in martial skill." Just as Moses had done, Washington bore this all with patience as he knew that "what the people complained of, they would afterwards see to be most advantageous."¹²¹

Moses and Washington both exhibited the kind of love for their countrymen that was befitting of a leader. When the Israelites had made the golden idol and worshipped it, the Lord was angry and threatened to destroy them. Moses stepped in and stood between the Lord and the people, defending them because he "loved his brethren more than his own life." Carle asked his congregation, "And how often did our immortal chief put his

¹²⁰ Carle, 8-9.

¹²¹ Ibid., 12.

life in his hand, and step forth between us and danger. If there be any significations to action...Washington expressed as great love to his country as could be expressed...he was a real and true patriot.”¹²²

Eulogists were consistent in illustrating the bravery Washington had shown throughout his life by way of comparing him to Moses. Both had been warriors who faced seemingly hopeless circumstances. When Moses and the Israelites were encamped by the Red Sea, closely pursued by the Egyptians, Moses “manifested great firmness, prudence, and courage.” In those dark times during the war with Great Britain, “the people were sorely afraid but the American Moses hushed the murmurs of the people – dispelled the gloom, and opened a passage through the waters.”¹²³ Fred Hotchkiss echoed this sentiment when addressing his audience in Saybrook, Connecticut. He reminded them that “all the difficulties were not sufficient to reduce the mind of this Great Man, for a moment, to despondence.” Washington’s soul seemed most calm when he was in the middle of distress. Despite the dangers facing the nation, Hotchkiss said, he never considered giving up on its noble cause. “We behold him at the same time with the sword in one hand, and the pen in the other; there contending with enemies, and here advising and urging with the legislators and the people.”¹²⁴

A final virtue necessary for good leadership, shared by both Moses and Washington, was the *recognition* of Providence as the true source of power. Thaddeus Fiske implied that “Religious principle” was what guided the leadership of both men and was the “leading trait” of Washington. According to Fiske, such a principle is the:

¹²² Ibid., 11-12.

¹²³ Ibid., 10-11

¹²⁴ Hotchkiss, 13.

foundation of everything great and good in man.; so it is the basis on which the dignified and illustrious character of Washington was raised. It rendered the commanding and influential exercise of his wonderful talents, still more commanding and influential.

If those in power do not recognize Providence in all that they do, “great purposes and opportunities are always liable to be perverted to purposes of mischief.” A nation should never give power to such a person, as there is no safety in committing power and trust to their management. Fiske concluded, “But where religious principle is established and in operation, there we may confidently look for the most useful improvement of every talent, and the strictest fidelity in the discharge of every duty.”¹²⁵ Hotchkiss noted that the people recognized this distinction, saying, “It was to the honor of their countrymen, that, while they admired the instrument, they bowed the knee of gratitude to the great PARENT of their national Saviors.”¹²⁶ By calling attention to Washington’s piety, eulogists might have been reminding civil magistrates (as well as the general public) that they were accountable to God, in both this life and the next, and should act accordingly.¹²⁷

While Moses might have been the most popular symbol of Washington’s virtues as a leader, eulogists also compared Washington to the archetypal king of the Hebrew Bible, David. Patrick Allison reflected on David’s dedication to always doing what was right in the sight of the Lord. Except in one instance (the incident with Bathsheba), David “did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from anything that he commanded all the days of his life.” Allison suggested that a comparison with

¹²⁵ Fiske, 10-11.

¹²⁶ Hotchkiss, 7.

¹²⁷ Smylie, 251.

Washington might have been appropriate. Even those who had disagreed with Washington's decisions as a leader could not have cast aspersions on his character because of Washington's "consummate internal rectitude" and "zeal to promote the best interest of America." Not only does this statement compare Washington's leadership to one of the greatest kings of the biblical past, but it also suggests that Washington's moral rectitude and self-control surpassed that of David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba. Once again, we see an affirmation that self-control and an orientation toward following God's will were both essential for those in power.

Scholar James Smylie makes an interesting point, suggesting that while clergymen readily compared Washington to Moses and David in their eulogies, they did not identify him with Aaron or as a Levite. If David can be described as the archetypal king, then Aaron is the archetypal priest of the Hebrew Bible. He understood how to attain God's favor as well as how to assuage God's anger. On occasion, biblical kings and prophets did not maintain a separation of powers and performed priestly actions. Clergymen were more comfortable in comparing Washington to Moses or David, Smylie argues, because these individuals represented a political calling and political instruments of God. For the Protestant ministers who delivered the majority of these eulogies, "priestcraft represented the corrupt regimes of Europe as much as did kings and nobles." While they might have compared Washington to Moses and David in their biblical allusions, "they did not inaugurate him with a crown or scepter. Neither did they invest him with mitre and crosier." To have drawn parallels between Washington and these ancient priests would have promoted a confusion of functions which these clerics sought to keep separate in the development of eighteenth-century American leadership.

“Washington was responsible to God and to the people as America’s republican prophet and king, not as America’s chief priest.”¹²⁸

Federalists vs. Republicans: Who Would Lead in the New Century?

Another aspect of these clerical reflections on leadership was a decidedly political one. At the time of Washington’s death in 1799, there was a bitter political battle for the presidency taking place between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, representing the Federalist and Republican parties respectively. It was during the presidential contest between the two men in 1796 that clerics first expressed their opinions, as religion was brought to the fore of the campaign. Evidence for this can be found in the number of orations delivered and pamphlets written by Federalists in order to expose Jefferson as an enemy of Christianity.¹²⁹ Federalists arrived at this conclusion because of many factors. First, they pointed to his 1786 bill calling for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Virginia as proof of his hostility toward religion.¹³⁰ Secondly, his championing of the French Revolution caused much concern. The French religious establishment had been a popular target of revolutionaries, many of whom attacked the idea of religion itself. They eventually succeeded in confiscating church property, abolishing tithes, suppressing monastic orders and outlawing clerical oaths. Priests were killed and forced into exile while church buildings themselves were torn down or converted into “Temples of reason.” Though Jefferson himself may not have condoned these actions, his connection

¹²⁸ Ibid., 245-246.

¹²⁹ Robert M. S. McDonald, “Was There a Religious Revolution of 1800?” in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, James Horn, Jan Ellis Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf eds., (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 174.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 178.

with the revolution in general allowed people to characterize him as an enemy of Christianity.¹³¹ Finally, Jefferson was known to be an old friend of Thomas Paine, who, in his extremely popular *Age of Reason*, espoused the ideals of rationalistic deism and attacked Christian dogma.¹³² These factors, combined with a general fear that Deism was on the rise in America (with atheism soon to follow), led many members of the clergy to form close ties with lay Federalists to call Jefferson's character, and therefore his ability to lead, into question.¹³³

Clergymen, especially in New England, informed congregations of Jefferson's supposed hostility toward religion. These attacks were so convincing that, upon hearing of Jefferson's election to the presidency, people supposedly buried their Bibles in gardens or hung them down wells for fear that federal troops would soon be along to confiscate them. While these stories are likely exaggerations, they probably accurately demonstrate the levels of fear and hostility people felt during this election.¹³⁴ It was a level of hostility, no doubt, spurred on by the warnings of some clerics. Just a short time before Washington's death, in 1798, Timothy Dwight predicted that, if Republicans were to gain power, "we may behold a strumpet personating a Goddess on the altars of JEHOVAH." Bibles would be "cast into a bonfire, the vessels of the sacramental supper born by an ass in public procession, and our children, either wheedled or terrified, uniting in chanting mockeries against God." He concluded, saying, "that we may see our wives and

¹³¹ Ibid., 175-176.

¹³² Ibid., 177.

¹³³ Ibid., 174.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 173.

daughters the victims of legal prostitution.”¹³⁵ It seems likely that passionate clergymen would have taken advantage of the larger than usual audiences at the memorial services for Washington to remind people of this looming threat.

After Washington’s death, in the midst of the presidential campaign, some eulogists lent their support to the Federalist candidate, John Adams, by expressing the close relationship he had with Washington, a paragon of republican leadership. For example, Reverend Uzal Ogden of Trinity Church in Newark, New Jersey, dedicated his funeral sermon to Adams, making references to Adams’ close relationship with Washington. Addressing Adams in the introduction of his sermon, Ogden said that he had “reason to believe, that by no Citizen among us was he [Washington] more beloved than by yourself...you were in Habits of Intimacy and Friendship with him, and labored and toiled together, in perfect coincidence of sentiment.” Ogden claimed that Adams had admired Washington’s virtues. Adams and Washington formed a particular partnership that brought about the freedom of the nation, and Adams was the *only* remnant of that patriotic body.¹³⁶

Some eulogists offered the idea that the spirit of Washington’s leadership had been passed on to Adams. Samuel Magaw told his audience in the German Lutheran Church of Philadelphia that Washington had “ascended like Elijah, in his triumphal car, and bids us follow. He hath left, meanwhile, an exalted portion of his spirit, and his mantle, to an Adams.”¹³⁷ Another Philadelphia clergyman, William Rogers of the

¹³⁵ Timothy Dwight, *The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse, Preached on the Fourth of July, 1798* (New Haven: Greens, 1800), 20. EAI no. 33656.

¹³⁶ Uzal Ogden, *Two Discourses Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington, at Mount Vernon, December 14, 1799* (Newark: Day, 1800), v. EAI no. 38154.

German Reformed Church, prayed to God that the mantle of their departed Elijah rest upon Adams, the current President of the United States. “Like Elisha of Old,” he asked, “may he possess a double portion of the Spirit and virtues of his once intimate--- affectionate---but now entombed friend!” He concluded by praying that, under Adams’ continuing administration, “thy American people may experience, in some measure, an alleviation of their present general distress!”¹³⁸ Through these statements, clerics with Federalist sympathies sought to secure a second term of office for Adams, the embodiment of the order that Washington represented. As the Unitarian minister Joseph Tuckerman of Boston noted, “We have been deprived of one, on whom our reliance was placed without reserve. Let us endeavor as far as possible to repair this loss, by reposing the same confidence in ADAMS, his illustrious successor.”¹³⁹

Those clerics who supported Thomas Jefferson seem to have been less explicit in making their case for the Republican Party.¹⁴⁰ Samuel Miller was a well known Jeffersonian during his early pastorate in New York, but he did not make an explicit case for Jefferson in his eulogy.¹⁴¹ However, he did make comments which might provide insight into his political leanings. Miller thought it pleasing to observe that, despite the tumultuous political climate of the times, and amid all of the accusations of corruption and foreign influence which plagued the country, Washington’s integrity was not under

¹³⁷ Samuel Magaw, *An Oration Commemorative of the Virtues and Greatness of General Washington* (Newfield: Beach, 1800), 22. EAI no. 37880.

¹³⁸ Rogers, 6.

¹³⁹ Joseph Tuckerman, *A Funeral Oration. Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 22. EAI no. 38680.

¹⁴⁰ Smylie, 244.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

suspicion. He added, “Even those who believe his political errors to have been most numerous, have yet acknowledged, that they were errors of a mind actuated by the purest motives, and pursuing, with undeviating rectitude of intension, the public good.”¹⁴² The suggestion that some of the political decisions made by Washington had been perceived as errors may have reflected poorly on Adams, as Adams served as Washington’s Vice-President and succeeded him in the presidency.¹⁴³ Patrick Allison appeared more direct in promoting Jefferson when he called Washington’s life a “living lecture on Republicanism,” adding that Washington had “died in the Republican faith.”¹⁴⁴ The printed version of the eulogy is clear, spelling Republicanism with a capital “R”, demonstrating that Allison was appropriating the leadership and virtues of Washington as illustrative of the Jeffersonian philosophy of government.¹⁴⁵ Allison later argued that, “It is not an article in the creed of a Republican or of a Christian, that the safety of a country depends on the life and actions of any one man.”¹⁴⁶ While this statement is made in reference to Washington, it is possible that Allison was here promoting the idea that Adams was not indispensable in the continued success of the nation, leaving room for Jefferson’s ascension to power.

James Madison made reference to the party system that had begun to develop, but in a somewhat admonishing tone. He reminded his congregation that Washington had not belonged to either of the parties which were embroiled in the current contest for the

¹⁴² Miller, 33.

¹⁴³ Smylie, 244.

¹⁴⁴ Allison, 19.

¹⁴⁵ Smylie, 245.

¹⁴⁶ Allison, 13.

presidency. “During his administration,” Madison stated, “it is true, that parties, the concomitants of all free governments, arose. Washington too had his party; it was that of the public good. He was the chief magistrate of a whole nation, and not of a part of that nation.”¹⁴⁷ This may have been an attempt to quell some of the partisan disputes, promoting unity in a time of national mourning. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as a challenge to the notion that Adams deserved the presidency because his party affiliation had been linked to Washington’s administration.

Conclusion

At the time of Washington’s death, the American people were in the midst of an experiment. By way of a relatively new Constitution, Americans had defined a new type of presidential office, which had been personified in the character of Washington. In their sermons on the occasion of his death, clerics helped Americans affirm confidence in this new system while simultaneously offering Washington as an example against which future generations could measure their leaders. In their estimation, the president was to be an office won not by divine appointment or hereditary titles, but earned by the strength of their character. Unlike the monarchs of Europe, the president should be subject to the people and, of course, ultimately to God. These ideas about leadership contributed to the development of civil religion, making the republican process itself sacred. As Bellah points out, it is a fundamental tenet of American civil religion that sovereignty should rest with the people in ordinary political matters, but ultimate sovereignty is attributed to God.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Madison, 21.

By appealing to the examples of figures like Moses and David, the eulogists were further legitimizing the office of the presidency “by associating Washington with those great events through which God had brought the United States into being a nation and by commending the wise, just, and moderate use of dominion.”¹⁴⁹ By taking sides in the fight between Federalists and Republicans, clerics lent their authoritative voices to the process, trying to shed light on the kind of political philosophy their leaders should have. In calling attention to Washington’s virtuous example as a leader, eulogists were reminding civil magistrates, as well as the citizenry in general, that they were accountable to God, in both this life and the next, and should act accordingly. By ascribing to Washington’s leadership religious, moral and historical dimensions, the clerics played a significant role in shaping the office of the presidency in the collective imagination of the American people.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Bellah, 4.

¹⁴⁹ Smylie, 250-251.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

CHAPTER 3

ADORATION AND EMULATION:

DEFINING CHRISTIAN PIETY IN THE NEW NATION

Introduction

From the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, to the death of George Washington in 1799, church leaders intensified their efforts to “stamp Christian goals on a now independent society.”¹⁵¹ During the revolutionary and early national periods, many clergymen expressed their fears concerning the future of Christianity in the new nation. These concerns were brought about by many factors, including the destruction of church buildings, intermittent drops in church attendance, and the rise of secular pride in the accomplishments of the Revolution.¹⁵² As has been previously discussed, there was a sense that rational Deism was on the rise in America, helped by the fact that it was linked to several of the most prominent citizens (including Washington). Christianity itself seemed to be under attack, as well as the clergy’s relevance in an uncertain future. Amid these uncertainties and changes, it was generally agreed upon, by the clergy and statesmen alike, that a virtuous citizenry was necessary for a republican society to be successful.¹⁵³ One can read many of the eulogies delivered in honor of Washington as seeking to establish such virtues in a particularly Christian light. This was accomplished through asserting Washington’s religiosity as a perfect example to emulate,

¹⁵¹ Jon Butler, *Awash in the Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 212.

¹⁵² Butler, 213.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

developing the lessons of religious improvement to be gleaned from his death, and by reinterpreting the near sacrilegious veneration of Washington as the duty of every Christian American.

Washington: Paragon of Christianity

Many clergymen took the opportunity of Washington's death to make clear that the former president was, in fact, a Christian. For several reasons, they seemed to believe that it was necessary to overcome any doubts that he had been anything less than a faithful Christian. As has been discussed, many believed that Washington had been specifically chosen by God to carry out God's plan for America. If Washington had been an enlightened Deist rather than a more orthodox Christian, it would have raised serious doubts about the covenantal relationship between God and the American people. By affirming Washington's orthodoxy, clergymen seemed to affirm the American identity of a chosen and protected people of God.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, linking Washington to the Christian faith helped make the case that America was, or at least should be, a Christian nation. As Samuel Bishop noted, speaking to his congregation at the Meeting House in Pittsfield, New Hampshire, "Let deists, atheists, and infidels of every description, reflect on this...that the brave, the great, the good Washington, under God the Saviour of his country, was not ashamed to acknowledge and adore a Greater Saviour, whom they despise and reject."¹⁵⁵ The statement might imply that true Americans would embrace Christ and, by so doing, honor their fallen leader. In describing Washington's faithfulness,

¹⁵⁴ Kahler, 59.

¹⁵⁵ Samuel Bishop, *An Eulogium on the Death of Gen. George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Armies of America. Pronounced February 22d, A.D. 1800* (Gilmanton: Elijah Russell, 1800), 12. EAI no. 36981.

eulogists also expressed elements of their own piety and the piety they expected from those who listened to their sermons.¹⁵⁶

The eulogists tried to prove Washington's religiosity in several ways, firstly by appealing to his church attendance. For some, like Samuel Stillman, minister of the First Baptist Church in Boston, it was enough that Washington was an official member of the Episcopal Church and "*consequently* a believer in Christianity."¹⁵⁷ Stanley Griswold promoted the idea that Washington was a "regular attendant upon public worship when he had opportunity...attending the worship of all denominations where he happened to be." Griswold, as if no further proof of Washington's piety was needed, concluded, "What could we wish more?"¹⁵⁸ According to Alexander MacWhorter, regular church attendance was something that Washington deemed important throughout his life, reporting that

In the army he kept no chaplain of his own, but attended divine services with his Brigades, in rotation, as far as conveniency would allow...He steadily attended the worship of God when President...He was a member of the Episcopal Church, and always continued to be a member thereof, and was an ornament of the same.¹⁵⁹

The eulogists also found the quality of Washington's church attendance exemplary. Apart from his attendance being "regular and constant, he always appeared serious and engaged" when present.¹⁶⁰ John Croes, Presbyterian rector of Trinity Church

¹⁵⁶ Smylie, 246.

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Stillman, *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Death of George Washington* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1800), 13. EAI no. 38563. [Emphasis added].

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Griswold, *A Funeral Eulogium, Pronounced at New-Milford, on the Twenty-Second of February, 1800* (Litchfield: Thomas Collier, 1800), 17. EAI no. 37549.

¹⁵⁹ MacWhorter, 3.

in Swedesboro, New Jersey, told his congregation that, while at services, “[Washington] availed himself of the benefits of the sacraments instituted by Christ...”¹⁶¹ “Thro’ all the vicissitudes of his important life,” yet another added, “he uniformly attended the worship of God, with punctuality and reverence, and gave his highest sanction to all the institutions of religion.”¹⁶² The eulogists contended that, even when not able to attend church services, Washington observed the Sabbath day with the utmost respect.¹⁶³ One eulogist noted that Washington, who was fully aware of the amount of business to which he needed to attend after his inauguration in New York, made it clear that he did not wish to be constantly interrupted by visitors. To that end, he designated certain days and times on which he would be agreeable to such visitations. He was particularly adamant that he would not be interrupted on Sundays, thus proving “the great reverence he had for the Lord’s Day.”¹⁶⁴

Eulogists found further evidence for Washington’s Christianity in various public statements he made throughout his life. Eliab Stone explained that, in Washington’s communication with the public, he often expressed his deep sense of a superintending Providence, and of his own dependence upon divine direction. Stone commented, “He never said, like the proud conquerors of the earth, My own arm hath gotten me victory. But he uniformly ascribed his success to the blessing of God upon the united exertions of

¹⁶⁰ Eliab Stone, *A Discourse, Delivered at Reading February 22, 1800... for the Memory of General George Washington* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 9. EAI no. 38564.

¹⁶¹ John Croes, *A Discourse Delivered at Woodbury, in New-Jersey, on the Twenty-Second of February Eighteen Hundred* (Philadelphia: Ormrod, 1800), 24. EAI no. 37270.

¹⁶² Jonas Coe, *A Sermon, Delivered before the Military Officers, Apollo Lodge, and a Large and Respectable Number of the Citizens of Troy, January 12th, 1800* (Troy: Moffitt, 1800), 6. EAI no. 37199.

¹⁶³ Stone, 9.

¹⁶⁴ MacWhorter, 3.

the whole nation.”¹⁶⁵ Samuel Stillman noted that, “In [Washington’s] public acts we have repeated evidence of his reverence for Deity and dependence on his Providence.” Stillman called attention to a statement in which Washington resigned his commission to Congress at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. Stillman quoted part of Washington’s statement, which read:

The successful termination of the war has verified the most sanguine expectations, and my gratitude for the interposition of Providence, and the assistance I have received from my countrymen, increases with every review of the momentous subject. I consider it as an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my official life, by commending interests of my dearest country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them to his holy keeping.

Stillman added, “Thus prays our great military Chief, may soldiers of every description go and do likewise!”¹⁶⁶

The most often quoted of these public statements was Washington’s “Farewell Address” of 1796, delivered to Congress on the occasion of his leaving office. In it, Washington stated that “reason & experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”¹⁶⁷ James Madison expounded upon this statement, telling those gathered in Williamsburg, Virginia, that Washington recognized that “republicanism without morality was a chimera; and that morality without religion was as evanescent as the baseless fabric of a vision.” For morality to pervade the fabric of a republic, it must “have its utmost link fastened to the footstool of

¹⁶⁵ Stone, 9-10.

¹⁶⁶ Stillman, *Washington*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Washington’s “Farewell Address”, quoted in Smylie, 248.

the throne of God.” Madison shared his hope that Americans would heed this advice, exclaiming, “When Washington becomes a preacher, who will not listen.”¹⁶⁸

Clergymen also sought to prove Washington’s religious convictions by describing his character as the natural outcome of Christian belief. As Samuel Stillman told his congregation, “His *religious* character will be established in the view of every candid mind by the tenor of his life; provided the tree is to be known by the fruit.”¹⁶⁹ Several eulogists focused on how he carried himself throughout his life, leading one member of the clergy to state that Washington “manifested Christian benevolence, by his hospitality to strangers, and his liberality to the poor.”¹⁷⁰ John Croes listed many of Washington’s virtues, including his patriotism, modesty, humanity, disinterestedness, justice, purity and his dependence on Providence as sure signs of his Christian faith. He concluded that Washington’s “devout aspirations for the happiness and welfare of his country, and his uniform piety were strong proofs of religion on his heart.”¹⁷¹

Still others appealed to the way in which Washington dealt with his own death as proof of his piety. One eulogist noted that, “In the closing scene of his life, he discovered nothing of the weakness of human nature; - no distrust of the foundation of his hope. He declared that he was not afraid to die. And he met his fate, as he had lived, as a Christian

¹⁶⁸ Madison, 22.

¹⁶⁹ Stillman, *Washington*, 12.

¹⁷⁰ Jonathan Huse, *A Discourse, Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington, Late President of the United States, Who Died December 14th, 1799; Delivered in Warren, (District of Maine.) on the 22d, of February, 1800* (Wiscasset: Hoskins, 1800), 10. EAI no. 37668.

¹⁷¹ Croes, 25.

Hero.”¹⁷² This sentiment was echoed in the introductory hymn of Harry Holcombe’s eulogy, which said, in part,

Thy grace sustain’d him in his death
Thro; faith in CHRIST he knew no fears,
With Christian hope resigned his breath
In perfect peace, mature in years.¹⁷³

Aaron Bancroft informed his audience in Worcester, Massachusetts, that Washington’s mind had been “fortified for the event...by the enlivening hopes of religion.” Because Washington had been a disciple of Christ, he perceived death as being “illuminated by the beams of revelation: The prospect of exchanging the glory of this world, for an unfading, an immortal wreath, supported him through the last scene of humanity.”¹⁷⁴ Despite the variety of “evidence” produced by the clergy attesting to his piety, there were several reasons to doubt Washington’s orthodoxy.

With regard to church attendance and strict observance of the Sabbath, Washington’s diary indicates that he did not attend very often (in 1768, only fifteen Sundays). Also, Washington passed up many opportunities to attend Church in order to visit with friends, hunt, travel, or simply stay at home alone.¹⁷⁵ Despite claims that Washington had availed himself of all of the rites of the Church, he seems to have exhibited reservations with regard to both confirmation and communion. Similar to other Founding Fathers who were raised in the Anglican tradition, Washington was never

¹⁷² Stone, 10.

¹⁷³ Harry Holcombe, *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Death of Lieutenant-General George Washington, Late President of the United States of America* (Savannah: Seymour & Woolhopter, 1800), 3. EAI no. 37634.

¹⁷⁴ Bancroft, 15.

¹⁷⁵ David L. Holmes, *The Religion of the Founding Fathers* (Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland and The Clements Library, 2003), 81.

confirmed, something he would have had the chance to do after 1780 (when the Episcopal Church secured bishops).¹⁷⁶

Even more significant is the fact that Washington seems to have avoided the sacrament of Holy Communion, especially after the American Revolution. It was typical in the late eighteenth century for Anglican or Episcopal churches to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion at the end of a service on four Sundays out of the year. Technically, all Anglicans were supposed to receive Communion at least once a year as a sign of one's commitment to Jesus Christ. The evidence that Washington remained until the end of the service on these days is not terribly reliable. More reliable would be the accounts of people like Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis, Washington's adopted granddaughter. According to her statements, she and Washington would always leave church at the end of the regular service, before Communion was given. Also convincing is the testimony of William White, Washington's bishop and pastor in Philadelphia. When asked in his later years as to whether Washington had participated in the sacrament, he answered, "truth requires me to say, that General Washington never received communion, in the churches of which I am parochial minister. Mrs. Washington was an habitual communicant."¹⁷⁷

While most eulogists did not leave room for the idea that Washington had been anything less than a proper Christian, a few seem to have acknowledged that there were reasons to doubt his personal religious beliefs.¹⁷⁸ Reverend Timothy Dwight, Congregationalist minister and president of Yale College, spoke to the people of New

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 82-82.

¹⁷⁸ Kahler, 62.

Haven, Connecticut, about such accusations. “With respect to his religious beliefs...” said Dwight, “doubts may and well exist.” Dwight believed that Washington’s personal religious beliefs would ultimately be decided by God but, for his part, he had considered Washington’s public veneration and testimony about his secret devotion to God evidence enough to confirm Washington’s Christianity. Dwight concluded, “I shall only add, that if he was not a Christian, he was more like one, than any man of the same description, whose life has been hitherto recorded.”¹⁷⁹ Stanley Griswold admitted that some had characterized Washington as having never been a particularly zealous Christian. They argued that he was not beholden to any particular creed and that, when he spoke of God, he referred only to the God of nature, hardly ever using the name of Christ. “Therefore,” said Griswold, “many have concluded that he must even be a Deist, though none that I have heard have ventured to call him an Atheist.”¹⁸⁰

Both direct statements and allusions to Deism appeared often when these eulogists discussed doubts about Washington’s Christianity. Griswold drew attention to those who called Washington a Deist, saying that they were either “narrow-minded bigots” or those who would seek the patronage of such people.¹⁸¹ Jonas Coe asserted that Washington was not a Deist, as his mind was “superior to modern licentious philosophy; and he readily discerned, and cordially embraced, the Christian religion.”¹⁸² Bancroft also affirmed that Washington had not been taken in by the “cold maxims of

¹⁷⁹ Timothy Dwight, *Washington*, 27-28.

¹⁸⁰ Griswold, 16.

¹⁸¹ Griswold, 17.

¹⁸² Coe, 6

philosophy.”¹⁸³ Some of this rhetoric could be attributed to political purposes related to the Federalist focus on Thomas Jefferson Deism. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Jefferson’s supposed hostility to orthodox Christianity became a major issue during the election of 1800. Politically motivated clergymen with Federalist leanings may have been trying to draw a distinction between Washington, the Christian, and Jefferson, the Deist, without having to mention Jefferson by name.¹⁸⁴ However, we can not overlook the importance of this rhetoric as instruction to a supposedly endangered Christian community. By speaking so disparagingly about Deistic philosophy and denying that Washington had any part in it, clergymen were urging their congregations to stay true to the Christian faith.

Rather than deny outright the accusations which put Washington’s religiosity in question, some attempted to reconcile the supposed irregularities with the preferred Christian faith. MacWhorter asserted that Washington was “truly a catholic spirit.” Misunderstandings about his personal beliefs could be attributed to his seeing the “distinctions of the great denominations of Christians, rather as shades of difference, than anything substantial, or essential to salvation.”¹⁸⁵ Reverend Dr. William Bentley, clergyman and journalist from Salem, Massachusetts, described Washington’s religion as “practical.” Washington had not been a student of theology and was not interested in matters of doctrine. Rather, Washington’s religion had provided him with laws by which he lived his life, in both public and private. It provided him with a sense of peace

¹⁸³ Bancroft, 15.

¹⁸⁴ Kahler, 62.

¹⁸⁵ MacWhorter, 3.

throughout his life. “He lived as a Christian ought to live,” and “he died resigned to his God.”¹⁸⁶ Stanley Griswold offered the idea that the positions that Washington held throughout his life required that he not be a “stickler for sects and systems. For he had to do with people of all systems and of all sects. Had he been a religious zealot, and as uncharitable as zealots commonly are, what would have been the consequence?” Additionally, by being a “bigot,” Washington would have been set up as a persecutor and destroyer of his country rather than its savior. Griswold concluded, “It may perhaps do for men of smaller business and smaller capacities to set up zealously in this way; But it would not do for one who was destined to act the part of Washington.”¹⁸⁷

This is an interesting move made by several of the eulogists. Rather than deny outright any claims that Washington had not been an orthodox Christian, they claimed Washington’s disinterest in theology and doctrine was a virtue. By not being a “stickler” for the details of a particular denomination, he was better able to serve the citizens of the United States, both collectively and individually. While some members of the Christian clergy might not have agreed with the message, at least some of the eulogists surveyed here seem to celebrate a supposed interdenominational strand in Washington as a positive characteristic for all Americans. Perhaps they recognized that if their country was to survive, partisan bickering among denominations would have to stop. Certainly, if one wished to serve the country to the degree that Washington had, bigotry and zealotry would need to be put aside for the greater good of the republic.

¹⁸⁶ William Bentley, *Eulogy on the Occasion of the Death of George Washington, Delivered at Salem, Massachusetts, January 2, 1800*, quoted in Kahler, 64.

¹⁸⁷ Griswold, 16-17.

Only one eulogist, Seth Williston (a missionary from Connecticut), seemed to admit that he did not have the answer as to whether Washington had truly been a Christian, stating that “a man may have shining talents and may maintain a good moral character, and yet be destitute of the grace of God, or a new heart.” He could not be sure that Washington “would not be found wanting in the balance of the sanctuary.” He concluded that, “If our patriot was pious as well as brave – if he was a man of prayer and a man of war, we rejoice. All the pious will be happy to sit with him at the feet of our exalted Prince, who is himself a man of war and a mighty conqueror.”¹⁸⁸ While Williston might have been comfortable with this ambiguity, it seems that most of the clerics needed Washington to have been a true Christian, if for no other reason than to provide an example to the rest of the people.

To illustrate that Washington provided an ideal example that Christians everywhere should imitate, Patrick Allison offered a prayer during his eulogy, in which he said that “In [Washington] we acknowledge the greatest & best of men among the dead or living.” Allison asked God to render Washington’s name precious to the people until the end of time, adding, “Let the remembrance of his public and private virtues excite others to go and do likewise.”¹⁸⁹ John Blair also recommended the example of Washington “to the imitation of his countrymen. It is dignified and lovely, and shews [sic] to what perfection human nature may arrive.”¹⁹⁰ Similarly, Richard Furman, pastor of the Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, asked his congregation to pursue

¹⁸⁸ Seth Williston, *The Agency of God, in Raising up Important Characters, and Rendering Them Useful; Illustrated in a Discourse, Delivered at Scipio, on the Twenty-Second Day of February 1800* (Geneva: Walker & Co., 1800), 21-22. EAI no. 39113.

¹⁸⁹ Allison, 24.

¹⁹⁰ Blair, 17.

Washington with “their mental eye.” His example “not only commands our respect; but invites our imitation.” The great leader provided a perfect example of what is possible when those who “sincerely engage in, and strenuously preserve virtuous pursuits.” Furman found Washington’s example especially important for the youth of America. He hoped that the rising generation would improve their lives by “forming their character by this excellent model.”¹⁹¹

There is probably some credence to the idea that Washington had difficulty accepting particular Christian doctrines. Regardless of his private beliefs, it is clear from his public and private statements that Washington recognized the importance of religion and, as chief executive, that he should try to provide a good example of public piety as well as public virtue.¹⁹² Likewise members of the clergy recognized the power of Washington as a “singular example of virtue, and piety.”¹⁹³ Clergymen used the opportunity of Washington’s death to encourage citizens to return to, or become better members of, the Christian community, promoting the idea that the best form of appreciation to God for Washington’s leadership would be to imitate the man himself.¹⁹⁴

The Death of Washington and Religious Improvement

In addition to using their eulogies to convert lapsed or non-Christians, the clergymen also focused on the “religious improvement” of the Christian community, seeking out the positive lessons that could be gleaned from Washington’s death. They

¹⁹¹ Furman, 23-24.

¹⁹² Smylie, 248.

¹⁹³ Blair, 15.

¹⁹⁴ Smylie, 248.

were preaching to larger than usual audiences, full of people who, though nominally Christian, did not attend church services regularly. Seeking to reinforce the importance of church attendance and matters of the spirit, clergymen instructed them in the Christian lessons to be found within this sad event.¹⁹⁵ The death of such an imposing figure on the American stage allowed ministers to emphasize the theme of personal salvation, transforming the memorial services into religious revivals. The death of Washington, who they contended had been raised up by Divine Providence, served as a reminder that no one could escape death. According to the ministers, people needed to take the time that they had left in this life to prepare for their deaths by paying less attention to worldly concerns and more to their eternal salvation.¹⁹⁶

Timothy Alden delivered a sermon in the South Church of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in which he brought these issues to the fore. “It becomes us,” he stated, “as followers of Jesus, to make a religious improvement of that sudden, unexpected and melancholy event.” He asked his audience, “If Washington be fallen, who can expect to evade the shafts of death?”¹⁹⁷ John Blair agreed that the loss of Washington was a great one, and that the only hope of recovery was to be found in “the improvement we shall make of it.” In light of this event, he first asked his congregation to acknowledge and adore the hand of God, “the sovereign disposer of all events” who has the right to do with individuals what He will. Since Washington’s death was the will of God, Blair, contended, “we will endeavor not to repine.”¹⁹⁸ Blair goes on to urge his congregation to

¹⁹⁵ Kahler, 71.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹⁷ Timothy Alden, *A Sermon, Delivered at the South Church in Portsmouth, on the V January* (Portsmouth: Pierce, 1800), 8-9. EAI no. 36790.

consider Washington's place in the afterlife, taking the opportunity to consider what they must do to secure their own salvation before their deaths.¹⁹⁹

Jonathan Belden, addressing a congregation in Hallowell, Maine, made the lesson of Washington's death explicit, saying:

Turn your attention, my audience, beyond the grave. Washington died to instruct you. By his example in this world, dignified and Christian, his spirit has ascended to God the Giver. With him you will be shortly lodged in the grave, with him you will shortly stand in judgment – imitate his virtues, live the Christian, and then your memory with Washington's will be blessed.

Richard Furman echoed Belden's sentiment, reminding his congregation of the reality of death. He asked his congregation to turn away from the mansion where Washington's presence is no longer seen, and to "turn them away from the dreary vault on Potomac's bank, where his mortal part lies mouldering in the dust." Instead, the people were to view Washington "in the realms of light, united in blest society with saints and patriots, who have finished, like him, the toils of virtue, and now snare vast rewards of grace." Furman told his audience that they had been furnished with a powerful motive to honor and cleave to the religion of Washington, "That we too may pursue a truly victorious and holy course of action; aspire to the sublime glories of the heavenly world, and finally share in its blessedness, when time shall be no more."²⁰⁰

These statements asked Christians to consider their lives in the light of their eventual deaths. What will happen to their souls upon leaving this world? Will they delight in the heavenly realms in which Washington now partakes? Implicitly, if not directly, these ministers were calling people back into the fold, reminding them that their

¹⁹⁸ Blair, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Blair, 16-18.

²⁰⁰ Furman, 27-28.

deaths were immanent. There was no time to wait to strengthen one's relationship with God. In a climate of intermittent drops in church attendance, the clergy were using the event of Washington's death as an opportunity to engender passionate devotion to Christ in their congregants for the sake of their immortal souls.

Mourning Washington and the Fear of Idolatry

The death of Washington posed a question to the country that it had never faced: What is the proper way to mourn a former chief magistrate? With no unified theory on how to mourn Washington, the question sparked a national conversation with both political and religious implications. From a religious standpoint, the largest fear seems to have been that overzealous mourners would commit the sin of idolatry, raising Washington to the level of a deity. This concern was probably exacerbated by the language used to describe the former leader as the "savior of his country," drawing obvious parallels with Jesus Christ himself.²⁰¹ The January 25 issue of the *Providence Gazette* describes a scene in the Episcopal Church of Providence, Rhode Island, that also might have contributed to this concern. In the sanctuary, a black shroud had been hung to commemorate the death of the former president. As Washington had died in December, the shroud had been intertwined with the evergreen Christmas decorations that had been hung to celebrate the birth of Christ. The symbolism of combining these decorations might implicitly have raised Washington to the level of Christ as a redeeming figure for the American people.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Jonathan Elmer, *An Eulogium, on the Character of Gen. George Washington, Late President of the United States* (Trenton: Craft, 1800), 4. EAI no. 37359. See also Bishop, 12; Griswold, 17.

²⁰² Kahler, 68.

Opposition to the funeral rituals did not appear in many newspapers, perhaps because so many of the editors were attempting to use their columns to portray a sense of national unity after the death of the former president. However, there were a few exceptions. The Republican *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* published a strongly worded letter that expressed religious (and perhaps political) concerns about the mourning rituals. Taking the pen name “Decency,” the writer agreed that Washington should be remembered and honored by Americans, but that Christians needed to observe certain limits in their remembrances of him. He stood opposed to the “ostentatious pageantry” of an empty bier at the head of a parade surrounded by mourners who were acting as if a body was in the coffin. The writer implored Christians to contemplate whether their observances constituted idolatry or blasphemy.²⁰³ A similar piece appeared in the *Boston Constitutional Telegraph*, which stated that:

Every virtuous citizen would wish to pay a proper and decent respect to the memory of General Washington...But while we revere him as a man, we ought as Christians not to elevate his character to the pinnacle of a God, or place him supremely above angels or archangels in heavenly mansions. The extravagant encomiums which we have often seen in our papers, border so strongly on profanity, and even blasphemy, that it cannot but be disgusting to the serious mind.²⁰⁴

The possible deification of Washington was a sensitive subject and the clergymen who eulogized him seem to have understood the fine line between praise and idolatry upon which they were walking. Warnings against such practices can be found in almost twenty percent of the extant eulogies.²⁰⁵ Reverend Fischer Ames admitted the possibility “that some will affect to consider the honors to be paid to this great patriot by the nation

²⁰³ Ibid., 65.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 69.

as excessive, idolatrous, and degrading to freemen, who are unequal.”²⁰⁶ Reverend Timothy Alden of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, recognized that the greatness of the man to be mourned posed a problem, exclaiming, “Who can behold such a character without an admiration if it may be so expressed, almost to idolatry! So much wisdom, prudence, humility, benevolence, and piety are seldom the portion of one man.”²⁰⁷ Samuel Macclintock attacked those who would fall prey to this sin, exclaiming:

The foolish impiety of idolizing creatures, the offspring of the superstition of the heathen, who placed their heroes and great men in the rank of their imaginary deities, to whom they thought divine honors were due, cannot but meet the indignant frown of every worshipper of the one only true GOD, and must be equally abhorrent with the purified spirit of our beloved Washington, as with your and mine avowed principles.

Walter King, Presbyterian minister of the church in Norwich, Connecticut, also offered a firm warning to his congregation. While feelings of grief are natural at such times, King contended, those feelings must be “regulated by an holy sorrow for *sin*, which is the real ground for all calamities.”²⁰⁸ John Carroll, archbishop of Baltimore and the first bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, took steps to prevent unintentional acts of idolatry or deification. In a letter written on December 29, 1799, Carroll requested that the priests remove the elements of the Holy Sacrament from their churches before the memorials took place. Additionally, he asked the priests to avoid using scriptural texts as part of their funeral orations.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Fischer Ames, *An Oration on the Sublime Virtues of General George Washington, Pronounced at the Old South Meeting-House in Boston* (Boston: Young & Minns and Manning & Loring, 1800), 26. EAI no. 36829.

²⁰⁷ Alden, 21.

²⁰⁸ Walter King, *A Discourse, Delivered in Chelsea, in the City of Norwich, Jan. 5, 1800* (Norwich: Hubbard, 1800), 6. EAI no. 37734.

²⁰⁹ Kahler, 70-71.

Many of the clergymen used their eulogies to defend the appropriateness of public commemorations of Washington. Blending religious and political messages, the clergy proclaimed that to remember Washington in this way was their duty as both Christians and Americans.²¹⁰ While not addressing the issue of idolatry directly, many argued that such memorials were the responsibility of the country. Patrick Allison told his congregations that “the mourning of States and Nations over conspicuous merit departed, is likewise common and equally commendable.”²¹¹ John Elliot, a pastor from Guilford, Connecticut, told his community that it was the duty of Americans to remember those who had contributed so greatly to the future of their country. He concluded that “Such praise-worthy deeds ought to be recorded on the hearts of their countrymen, more lastingly than on tables of brass, and the blessings enjoyed should ever remind us of the toils, the dangers and the virtues of those, by whom they were attained.”

Many eulogists alluded to the idea that the great republics of the past had been guilty of ingratitude and that America had to prove it was not guilty of the same. Reverend Ebenezer Gay expressed this concern to the citizens of Suffield, Connecticut. He noted that, however deficient their memorial was, they must express their gratitude. By doing so, they would “exhibit a phenomenon new in the history of nations, a republic which knows how to appreciate and reward the services of her citizens.” According to Gay, Rome had rewarded its best citizens by casting them into exile, stating that, “Ingratitude has hitherto been characteristic of republics. We shall rescue them from this

²¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

²¹¹ Allison, 3.

reproach.”²¹² Reverend Levi Glezen of Lenox, Massachusetts also mentioned that republics had historically been characterized as ungrateful. He also knew that this American republic was different, as its citizens had united to perpetuate the memory of Washington and his virtues.²¹³ This strategy may have served as another means of separating the American republic from those ancient governments that failed. If America did the correct thing by properly memorializing its best citizens, perhaps it was a sign that their government would be exempt from the fate of the failed republics of the past.

While some eulogists simply affirmed the rightness of memorializing Washington, others dealt with the accusation of idolatry directly. One strategy was to compare the memorial services for Washington with those memorials found in the Old Testament, which were, presumably, sanctioned by God. In fact, the most frequently cited Bible passage in the extant eulogies was from 2 Samuel 3:38, part of a eulogy spoken by King David at the funeral of Abner, one of the chief generals of the armies of Israel.²¹⁴ The passage reads, “Know ye that a prince and a great man is fallen this day in Israel?”²¹⁵ After citing this passage, Reverend David Osgood of the Congregation Church in Medford, Massachusetts, told his congregation that “In our American Israel is fallen a prince, eminent and distinguished above all the other princes of the age.”²¹⁶ After

²¹² Ebenezer Gay, *An Oration, Pronounced at Suffield, on Saturday, the 22'd of Feb. A.D. 1800* (Suffield: Gray, 1800), 4. EAI no. 37493.

²¹³ Levi Glezen, *An Oration Delivered at Lenox, on the Twenty-Second of February, 1800. By Levi Glezen. Published at the Polite Request of a Select Committee* (Stockbridge: Willard & Jones, 1800), 15-16. EAI no. 37522.

²¹⁴ Kahler, 66.

²¹⁵ 2 Samuel 3: 38, King James Bible.

²¹⁶ David Osgood, *A Discourse, Delivered December 29, 1799, the Lord's-Day Immediately Following the Melancholy Tidings of the Loss Sustained by the Nation in the Death of Its Most Eminent Citizen, George Washington* (Boston: Hall, 1800), 5. EAI no. 38170.

admitting that there were those in his own congregation that worried about the “anti-scriptural” nature of their mourning, Reverend John Mycall also appealed to this section of 2 Samuel. He claimed that he had “the authority of the sacred Oracles to countenance and support” his position on the rightness of the mourning rituals.²¹⁷

Elijah Parish of Byfield, Massachusetts admitted that the short history of their country provided no example of how to mourn the former president. He continued, “though we are in danger of adopting tokens of extreme sorrow; yet this is not the first instance of national mourning. For forty days, Jacob, the Hebrew patriarch was mourned in the nation where he died.”²¹⁸ Jonathan Huse delivered a similar message, noting that the ancient Israelites had the consent of Heaven when they appointed certain days for mourning their deceased citizens. When citizens of superior usefulness passed away, their “grief was general; and tokens of sorrow were seen throughout the land.” Huse took from their example that it was suitable for citizens of the “*American Israel*” to testify their sorrow at the death of Washington, who had filled many important positions throughout his life, and had been extremely useful to his country.²¹⁹ By justifying the memorial services in this way, eulogists not only cited an authoritative Christian source (the Bible), but they reminded Americans of their connection to ancient Israel as a people with a special relationship to God.

Another strategy for combating the accusations of idolatry was for eulogists to say that, rather than only honoring Washington, the memorials were ultimately paying tribute

²¹⁷ John Mycall, *A Funereal Address, on the Death of the Late General George Washington; Interspersed with Sketches of, and Observations on, His Life and Character* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 6-7. EAI no. 38023.

²¹⁸ Elijah Parish, *An Oration, Delivered at Byfield, February 22d, 1800, the Day of National Mourning for the Death of General George Washington* (Newburyport: March, 1800), 5. EAI no. 38184.

²¹⁹ Huse, 4.

to God, who gave Washington to the American people. James Kendall was clear that the respect shown to Washington was not idolatry. If done properly, people can admire and imitate “the copy, while we give the honor and the glory to the Great Archetype of all perfection and excellence.”²²⁰ In a similar way, Levi Frisbie spoke out against those who would accuse his congregation of idolatry.

For we religiously avow, and wish to have it forever understood, that we devoutly acknowledge his whole bright assemblage of abilities, virtues and achievements, to have been given him from Heaven in tenderness and mercy to these United States, and to that original, inexhaustible fountain of being and happiness, our unfeigned tribute and gratitude and praise, is, and ought to be ultimately paid.²²¹

William Linn, a Methodist from New York, described these memorials as an obligation to God, as all great men are servants of God himself. “In honoring them, we honor Him.” He admitted that heathens of the past had glorified God’s creatures rather than God himself and that there was a danger that their memorial might commit the same sin. He concluded, “Let us ascribe the glory to God, and we may safely extol the man whose loss this day we deplore.”²²² Peter Folsom also took on the accusation of idolatry, saying that, with regard to the deification of Washington, “we reply that to pay a tribute to tried merit ought not to lessen our esteem for the Great Governor of the universe.” On the contrary, paying homage to Washington was to praise the God that was able to “raise up, qualify, and send forth such an illustrious personage as our beloved Washington, to be an honor

²²⁰ James Kendall, *A Discourse, Delivered at Plymouth, February 22d, 1800* (Boston: Russell, 1800), 6-7. EAI no. 37722.

²²¹ Levi Frisbie, *A Discourse, Delivered at Plymouth, February 22d, 1800* (Newburyport: Blunt, 1800), 25. EAI no. 37477.

²²² William Linn, *A Funeral Eulogy, Occasioned by the Death of General Washington. Delivered February 22d, 1800, before the New-York State Society of the Cincinnati* (New York: Collins, 1800), 9. EAI no. 37843.

and to happify his American Israel.”²²³ “Not to notice his death,” argued Samuel Mead, “would indicate forgetfulness of his services, and ingratitude to God, who raised him up as our national Saviour.”²²⁴ Eulogists affirmed these events as pleasing to God, and a truly Christian act of piety. By quieting the concerns of others and claiming their rightness, clergymen were asserting themselves as qualified interpreters of the Christian tradition and leaders of the Christian and broader American communities.

Conclusion

In the estimation of Christian clerics, the rise of rational Deism, the French Revolution, and dropping attendance in churches all posed very real threats to the future of Christianity in the United States. Beyond worrying about the security of their positions of power, many seemed to fear for the souls of their fellow citizens. The newness of the country would have reminded clergymen that America’s future was not a given. If they did not choose to speak out, the secular philosophers might win the day, casting Christianity aside, and with it, America’s only hope at success. The eulogists affirmed that for the republic to succeed, virtues had to be instilled in its citizenry. Using the event of Washington’s death and the major impact it had upon the nation’s collective psyche, the eulogists made clear the spiritual lessons America needed to learn. Ultimately, Washington’s actual beliefs did not matter. What mattered most was the symbol of Washington as both an American and a Christian. By holding him up to their

²²³ Folsom, 12.

²²⁴ Samuel Mead, *A Sermon, Delivered December 29, 1799; Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington* (Salem: Cushing, 1800), 12. EAI no. 37944.

congregations, the clergymen were instructing the people on the virtues they saw as being important and necessary as they looked ahead to a new century.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

On December 14, 1999, at ten o'clock in the evening, staff members began to transform the Mansion of Mount Vernon into a place of mourning. Exactly two hundred years after the death of George Washington, the shutters of the historic home were shut with black ribbon, and all of the reflective surfaces were covered (it was considered extremely vain in the eighteenth century to look in a mirror during a period of mourning). When visitors began to arrive the next morning, a representation of Washington's body lay draped in cloth on a table in the dining room. The visitors passed by quietly in a spirit of reverence. On December 18 (the day of the funeral reenactment), more than four-thousand people crowded the Mount Vernon property as three hundred costumed characters walked in procession to deliver Washington's casket to its resting place. Many tears were shed that day and, as the commemoration was broadcast on C-SPAN, Americans all over the country were able to participate in the experience.²²⁵ As is evidenced in this commemoration, Washington's memory is still able to evoke strong emotions because of the role he continues to play in America's national creation story.

While grand commemorations of Washington such as this are not as prevalent as they have been in the past, his intellectual and moral legacy has endured. Washington's image remains on the most printed currency in our nation. He is honored in the cities, counties, and universities that bear his name. Most significantly, he is commemorated by our discourse, as he is still invoked when we attempt to define our collective national experience. The founding fathers in general, and Washington in particular, still loom

²²⁵ Mount Vernon Ladies Association, *Annual Report 1999*. Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1999), 34-35.

large in our national conversation about who we are as Americans. Political discourse in the United States often revolves around what the founders *really* intended when the country began. Leaders are measured by Washington's example, as Americans still celebrate Washington's avoidance and abdication of power as a defining moment in American history. As scholar Barry Schwartz recognizes, "For the mature American, that memory embodies a clear standard for political judgment; for the young, an effective tool of moral instruction."²²⁶ In discussions about the role of religion in our country, many Americans still appeal to Washington as a symbol of religious piety, affirming their characterizations of America as having been a Christian nation from the start.²²⁷ When people invoke Washington in this way, to justify their actions and beliefs, it usually says more about our current cultural ideals than it does about the man himself.

When considering Washington's eulogies in the broader context of America's religious history, two things come to the fore. First, the eulogists played a significant role in the development of a civil religion. By participating in an already rich tradition of providential thought, the eulogists fortified certain ideas that would come to dominate a uniquely American civil religion. They assured Americans of their chosenness, relating how God was actively engaged in their history. They were God's new Israel that had successfully gained their independence so that they might do God's work, providing an example to the rest of humanity. The rights that the colonists had fought and died to protect were more fundamental than any political ideology as those rights were granted by God himself. In reflecting on Washington's role as president, clerics helped develop a

²²⁶ Schwartz, 201.

²²⁷ Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

tenet of the civil religion that sovereignty in the political process rests with the people while ultimate sovereignty rests with God. Through the use of biblical archetypes and language, these eulogists helped to create a new way for Americans to understand themselves. Instead of creating a national church, Washington's eulogists helped to set up a national religion that promoted the divinity of the republic itself as a main tenet. At the time, these characterizations helped Americans cope with the fear that their country would fail. While most modern Americans may not seek the same kind of comfort, these ideas still influence the way many citizens see themselves and the role of the United States on the world stage.

This study also helps us to better understand how Protestantism, and especially Puritanism, has come to dominate in America's retelling of its own religious history. The eulogists spoke about Washington as an instrument of God, compared him to biblical figures, used him to promote the idea that God had chosen America for a special destiny, and so on. As this study has demonstrated, these ideas were firmly rooted in the Puritan dispositions of New England. These dispositions became nationalized by way of the Great Awakening and were fortified through war-time rhetoric. Ideas about God and America's relationship to God seem to have become instrumental in the formation of American nationalism in the early years of the republic. The fact that they originated in Puritan conceptualizations of collective purpose might provide insight into why so many narratives focus on the settlers of New England and their spiritual descendents as being foundational to America's history. It is true that, from the earliest years of colonization, the American religious landscape could be characterized as pluralistic, with many groups contributing to the country's history. It might also be the case that no single group of

people has contributed so much to how American's came to view themselves in a sacred mode as the Puritans. It is because of those New England settlers that many Americans still affirm that, "God hath designed this land for many important purposes of his glory and the good of mankind."²²⁸

²²⁸ Elliot, 16.

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