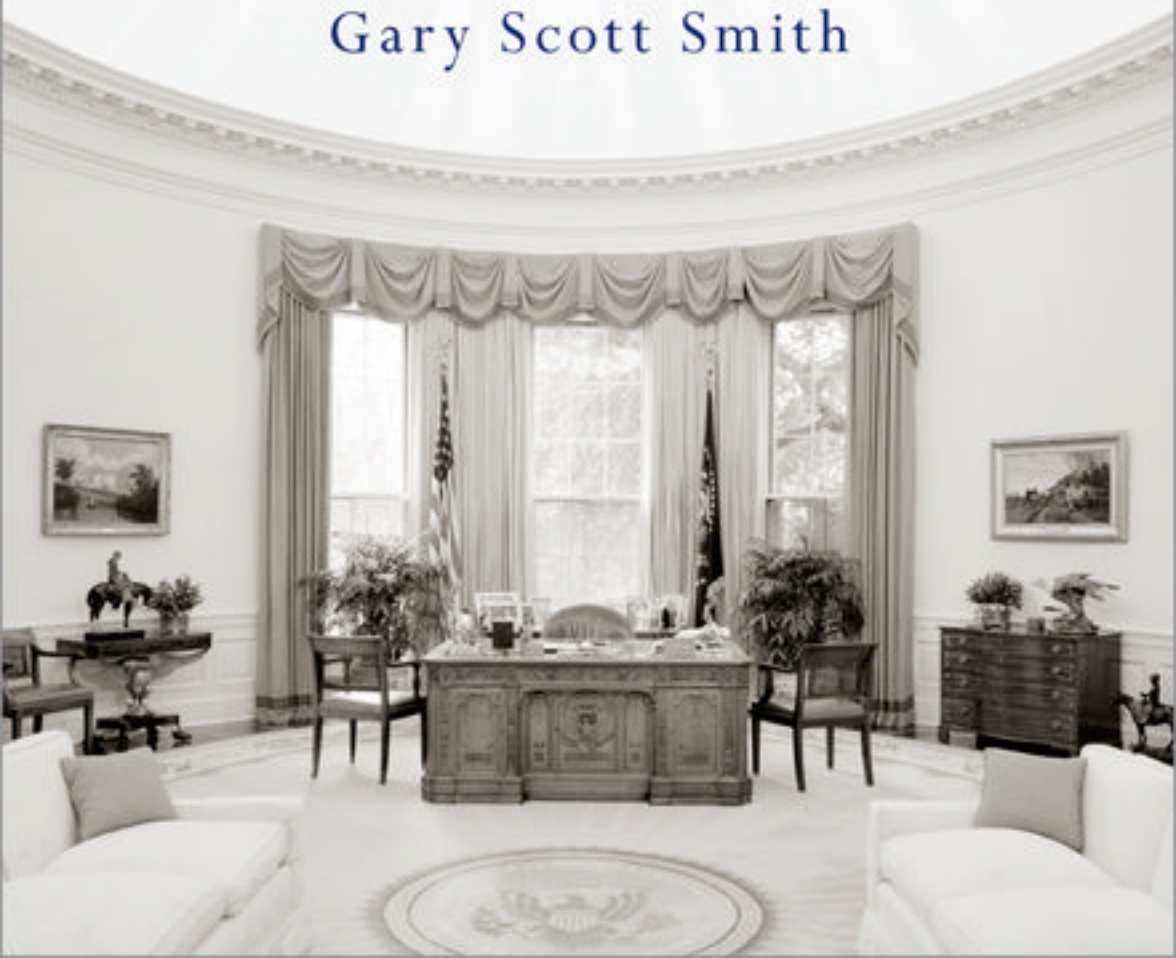


RELIGION
in the
OVAL OFFICE

THE RELIGIOUS LIVES
OF AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

Gary Scott Smith



Religion in the Oval Office

RELIGION IN THE
OVAL OFFICE

*The Religious Lives of
American Presidents*



GARY SCOTT SMITH

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file at the Library of Congress
ISBN 978-0-19-939139-4

A version of the John Quincy Adams chapter is included in Peter Prud' Homme, ed., *Faith and Politics in America: From Jamestown to the Civil War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 115-79 and is used by the permission of the publisher.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | vii |
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | ix |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1. JOHN ADAMS —A Church-Going Sage | 10 |
| 2. JAMES MADISON —Champion of Religious Liberty | 49 |
| 3. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS —A Republic of Virtue | 87 |
| 4. ANDREW JACKSON —Providentialist President | 123 |
| 5. WILLIAM MCKINLEY —America as God’s Instrument | 159 |
| 6. HERBERT HOOVER —Individual Faithfulness and Cooperative Association | 196 |
| 7. HARRY S. TRUMAN —The Golden Rule President | 228 |
| 8. RICHARD NIXON —A Private and Enigmatic Faith | 260 |
| 9. GEORGE H. W. BUSH —“One Nation under God” | 293 |
| 10. BILL CLINTON —Sin, Atonement, and Repairing the Breach | 329 |
| 11. BARACK OBAMA —“We Are Our Brother’s Keeper” | 367 |
| Conclusion | 416 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 423 |
| <i>Index</i> | 595 |

Acknowledgments

I could not have written this book without the assistance of numerous archivists, librarians, colleagues, and scholars at other institutions. Their help was invaluable in examining, analyzing, and describing the religious convictions and spiritual biographies of these eleven presidents. I want to thank the archivists at the Library of Congress and the presidential libraries of Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, William Clinton, and George H. W. Bush for helping me locate, use, and understand various materials. The librarians at Grove City College, especially Conni Shaw and Joyce Kebert, assisted me in procuring hundreds of books and articles. Grove City College colleagues Gillis Harp, Paul Kemeny, and Paul Kengor provided thoughtful, useful critiques of chapters of my book. Daniel Dreisbach of American University, H. Larry Ingle of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Corwin Smidt, formerly the director of the Henry Center at Calvin College, Daniel Williams of the University of West Georgia, and Mark David Hall of George Fox University also helped me to sharpen my analysis. In addition, several Grove City College students assisted my research: Dorothy Williams, Samuel Williams, Richard Kriebel, Corinne Gressang, Marissa Brincka, Laura Gaudio, Sarah Markley, and Claire Vetter. Copy editor Lynn Childress offered many constructive suggestions and made many helpful revisions. As with my last two books, my biggest debt of gratitude is to my wife Jane who accompanied me on numerous research trips, found obscure sources and references, and supplied beneficial stylistic suggestions.

G.S.S.

Abbreviations

| | |
|------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>AM</i> | <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> |
| <i>CA</i> | <i>Christian Advocate</i> |
| <i>CC</i> | <i>Christian Century</i> |
| <i>CH</i> | <i>Church History</i> |
| <i>CSM</i> | <i>Christian Science Monitor</i> |
| <i>CT</i> | <i>Christianity Today</i> |
| <i>JAH</i> | <i>Journal of American History</i> |
| <i>JCS</i> | <i>Journal of Church and State</i> |
| <i>LAT</i> | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> |
| <i>NR</i> | <i>New Republic</i> |
| <i>NYT</i> | <i>New York Times</i> |
| <i>PB</i> | <i>Presbyterian Banner</i> |
| <i>UP</i> | <i>United Presbyterian</i> |
| <i>WP</i> | <i>Washington Post</i> |
| <i>WSJ</i> | <i>Wall Street Journal</i> |
| <i>WT</i> | <i>Washington Times</i> |

Religion in the Oval Office

Introduction

[American presidents] engage in moral—and explicitly religious—activity. Literally they preach, reminding the American people of religious and moral principles and urging them to conduct themselves in accord with these principles. They lead prayers, quote from the Bible, and make theological statements about the Deity and His desires for the nation. . . . They are the moral leaders and high priests of American society. . . . Presidents themselves are contributing to the impression and indeed consciously cultivating it.

BARBARA HINCKLEY, *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 73

I can't imagine how a president could do his job without faith. [However,] it is impossible for us to know their hearts. It's barely possible to know your own. Faith is important, but it's also personal. When we force political figures to tell us their deepest thoughts on it, they'll be tempted to act, to pretend.

PEGGY NOONAN, "People Before Prophets," *Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2007

DATING ALL THE way back to George Washington, faith has played a very important and often controversial role in the lives of American presidents. Nevertheless, few scholars have carefully analyzed how chief executives' religious convictions affected their lives, policies, or decisions. Substantial evidence contradicts the frequent claim that a president's faith matters little in how he governs.¹ Numerous presidents have exhibited a deep and meaningful faith that has shaped their worldviews and characters and have testified that their religious convictions influenced their political philosophy, analysis of issues, decision-making, and performance in office. Their religious commitments strongly affected John Quincy Adams's efforts to fund roads, canals,

and educational institutions and promote diplomacy; William McKinley's decisions to declare war against Spain and take control of the Philippines; Herbert Hoover's quests to reform prisons and defend civil liberties; Harry Truman's approach to the Cold War and decision to recognize Israel; Bill Clinton's promotion of religious liberty; Barack Obama's policies on poverty and gay civil rights; and the crusades of several presidents to advance world peace. Many presidents have asserted that their faith in God helped them cope with immense challenges and gave them courage and equanimity in the midst of the storms that swirled around them. Several insisted that their faith grew stronger during their years in office.

While the First Amendment separates church and state, it has not divorced religion from politics. Religion is woven deeply into the fabric of political life in the United States. Although numerous factors affect how citizens vote and evaluate presidents' character, actions, and policies, their faith strongly influences many Americans. Moreover, the religiously devout have often participated in politics either to protect or advance their principles and values. Ignoring religious considerations leads to an inadequate understanding of American politics and the presidency. The proper role of religion in government and the religious convictions of presidential candidates have often provoked controversy: from false charges that Thomas Jefferson was an atheist to spurious claims that Barack Obama is a Muslim. Americans have hotly debated the role of religion in promoting morality, government funding of religious enterprises and activities, the travel and work of presidents on Sundays, prayer and the teaching of religion in public schools, and public displays of religious symbols, to name just a few issues.

When I began research on *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (2006), only a handful of scholars had examined the relationship between religion and the presidency. Since then, however, there has been a flood of books on the topic.² While this outpouring of books testifies to both scholarly and popular interest in religion and politics, it has not fully explained the faith of American presidents. As did my first volume, this book analyzes eleven of our nation's most interesting and influential chief executives: John Adams, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, William McKinley, Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. This group includes one Congregationalist, one Unitarian, one Presbyterian, one Methodist, two Episcopalians, two Southern Baptists, two Quakers, and one United Church of Christ member. In terms of political affiliation, it is two Federalists, four Republicans, and five Democrats. I examine the beliefs of these presidents as expressed in their letters, interviews, and addresses; the testimonies of those

who knew them well; and their actions, especially their participation in church services, prayer, and reading of the Bible and devotional and theological works. I also closely analyze their views of God, Jesus, human nature, salvation, and life after death and carefully assess their character, use of religious rhetoric, relationships with religious leaders and groups, and specific policies that were shaped in significant part by their religious commitments. While faith was important to other presidents, especially Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford, the twenty-two men examined in my two volumes are arguably the half of America's presidents for whom faith (especially as it affected their policies) or religious issues (especially in the case of John F. Kennedy) was most important.

"A President's world view," insisted James David Barber, "consists of his primary, politically relevant beliefs, particularly his conceptions of social causality, human nature, and the central moral conflicts of the time." It affects how he sees the world and responds to events. His worldview shapes his "conception of reality," perception of people, understanding of "how things work in politics," and primary aims. These pivotal, unprovable assumptions, Barber averred, enable presidents to make sense of life and to devise priorities. The presuppositions of chief executives determine what they most highly value and to what they pay attention. Their religious convictions have strongly influenced their understandings of the meaning of life, the basis of morality, the nature and purpose of society, the role of government, and the dignity of humans. "If a man's faith is sincere, it is the most important thing about him," argued presidential biographer Stephen Mansfield; "it is impossible to understand who he is and how he will lead without first understanding the religious vision that informs his life." "A person's faith commitment is a key window" into his "system of values and beliefs," *Washington Post* columnist Nathan Diament avowed. "A president's religion matters" because it often affects his policy choices.³

Presidents, like other politicians, use religion to further their own purposes—to gain the approval of various groups, enhance their popularity, win elections, increase support for their policies, and fortify their claim to be virtuous and honest. They employ religious and moral rhetoric to defend their own policies, programs, and actions and to criticize those of their opponents. Religious and moral appeals help connect particular policies with transcendent norms, elevating them above mundane, pragmatic concerns and strengthening citizens' commitment to them.

Presidents also frequently use biblical and moral discourse because Americans, who are much more religious than citizens of other postindustrial

nations, expect it. A president's testimony to his faith and use of religious and biblical language enables millions "to identify on a very basic level with the most powerful man in the world." Using religious rhetoric also helps chief executives gain support for programs and policies that parochial interest groups, political opposition, and the government's system of checks and balances make difficult to pass.⁴ Presidents are especially likely to employ religious discourse to rally public support for particular causes, justify complex policies or complicated legislation, fulfill their promises to provide moral leadership, or seize the initiative from Congress on important issues. The use of moral and religious arguments helps bolster the president's authority and enables him to claim the moral high ground.⁵

Polls consistently report that most Americans want their presidents to have a strong faith in God, which further encourages chief executives to stress their religious convictions and practices.⁶ Many Americans feel more comfortable when they know (or at least believe) that presidents pray about decisions they make and policies they adopt (although many still protest when they do not like these decisions or policies). Moreover, the nation's robust Judeo-Christian heritage and the absence of a national church demands that presidents serve as our civic chief priest, the person who sanctifies America's dominant institutions and values and provides comfort in times of crisis and tragedy. Custom, Congress, and current events all require presidents to play this role.

The president reinforces and promotes the nation's shared civic beliefs, strengthening core American values and helping to unify and motivate citizens.⁷ The president is expected to proclaim national days of prayer, celebrate the religious holidays of various faith communities, address national prayer breakfasts, lead citizens in mourning the death of statesmen and heroes, send condolences to grieving families, and speak at some major religious gatherings. Because most Americans find religious rhetoric to be inspiring, reassuring, and soothing, they appreciate presidents' evoking divine aid, calling for prayer, and giving thanks to God as they cope with war, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and other tragedies.

While presidents have generally played this priestly role very well, their use of prophetic civil religion to challenge the nation's norms and practices, chastise citizens for their selfishness and shortcomings, urge Americans to repent of their sins, and exhort them to practice greater justice, compassion, and generosity has been less frequent and effective. However, by trumpeting religious tenets and transcendent values, presidents have prodded Americans to build a better society and world.

Because religion can be employed to further a wide variety of purposes, many, especially academicians and journalists, are cynical about presidents'

professions of piety, use of biblical and spiritual language, attendance of religious services, and relationships with religious leaders and groups. They see these actions primarily as means of advancing presidents' political aims, rather than as genuine expressions of personal faith or reliance on God. Presidential religiosity, many protest, is a sham, charade, or smokescreen. It is a device presidents employ to achieve ulterior motives—personal aggrandizement, electoral victory, or policy success. Presidents clearly do engage in religious activities and use biblical and moral rhetoric in part because of Americans' expectations and to help accomplish political ends, but this does not necessarily indicate that their faith is disingenuous.

Moreover, it is often difficult to determine the role presidents play in crafting their speeches and to what extent these discourses convey their true convictions. Although all presidents have received assistance in composing their addresses and, since Calvin Coolidge, all have employed professional speechwriters, it is reasonable to assume that presidents' addresses often express their actual beliefs on a variety of subjects, including their religious convictions and understanding of Scripture. However, as noted, chief executives employ religious rhetoric to serve numerous purposes—to promote national unity, assuage collective grief, promote particular policies, and impress devout citizens. It is very challenging, therefore, to disentangle their personal convictions from their political uses of religion. As a result, in assessing presidents' faith, it is important to appraise their religious practices over their entire lives, not just their years in office or on the campaign trail, and to examine both their private correspondence (which is often less guarded and more revealing) and their public statements. Evaluating the testimonies of colleagues, companions, and disinterested observers about presidents' faith also provides insights into their personal beliefs and commitments.

Throughout American history many citizens have viewed strong faith as an asset, if not a requirement, for politicians, especially presidents. However, many Americans have expressed concerns about how a president's faith guides his work. Almost two-thirds of the 846 historians who responded to a 1982 survey did not want presidents to allow their religious beliefs to influence their performance. Moreover, a majority of the historians who were personally interviewed for this survey maintained that the deeper an individual's faith, the greater the danger it posed to his success as president.⁸ In numerous recent polls, more than two-thirds of respondents have declared that they want the president to be a person of faith.⁹ However, according to a 2011 ABC News-*Washington Post* poll, Americans, by a 66 percent to 29 percent margin, say that "political leaders should not rely on their religious beliefs in making policy decisions."¹⁰ Most Americans seem to want presidents to be pious, but

not religious zealots. Americans want chief executives to pray, attend church regularly, revere the Bible, and depend on God—but not to base their decisions directly on their intuitive perception of God’s will.

Most Americans also expect the president to uphold the nation’s highest values and to serve as its moral leader. As the embodiment of the state, the president’s character and actions should be consistent with the nation’s religious heritage and most venerated principles. The president, wrote Barber, should “personify our betterness in an inspiring way,” express our moral idealism, and provide “an example of principled goodness.” By his words and example, George Washington set a moral tone that other presidents have sought to follow. “The foundation for national policy,” he asserted in his first inaugural address, “will be laid in the sure and immutable principles of private morality.” Presidents have consistently contended that conventional moral standards should guide American conduct, that politicians’ private conduct and public service are closely connected, and that the nation’s government should provide a model of morality for the world. Truman claimed that the United States had supplied “one of the world’s greatest examples of political responsibility and moral leadership.” Dwight Eisenhower asked God to give his administration “the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby.” “America’s moral example,” Obama asserted, “must always shine for all who yearn for freedom and justice and dignity.”¹¹

Political scientist Ruth Morgan maintains that Americans expect presidents to serve as “a moral force” in formulating policies, “set high standards of personal ethics,” model “integrity in official conduct, and set the moral tone” for their administration. A chief executive’s moral authority, Frank Kessler affirms, depends on his or her ability “to demonstrate integrity, high-minded propose, [and] political savvy,” “retain the public trust,” and provide justice and security for citizens. The immoral actions of recent presidents, especially Nixon and Clinton, and the development of an omnipresent and much more adversarial media has led the conduct and statements of presidents to be exhaustively scrutinized and often attacked on television and radio talk shows, online, and in print, making it more difficult for them to be positive role models.¹²

Many politicians, journalists, and academicians insist that Americans expect too much from their presidents. They argue that citizens assign too much responsibility to presidents (and other political officials) for the moral condition of the nation, often leading to disappointment and disillusionment. Moreover, many contend that families, schools, churches, other civic organizations, and the media have a more important role to play than presidents in

inculcating individual and corporate morality.¹³ “We tend to overpersonalize our political hopes,” *Washington Post* columnist David Broder asserted, and thus contribute to the inevitable “letdown that comes when mortal men fall short of the godlike myths we construct around them.” “Potential presidents,” Nixon speechwriter Ray Price declared, “are measured against an ideal that’s a combination of leading man, God, father, hero, pope, [and] king.” Americans want their presidents “to be larger than life, a living legend, and yet quintessentially human.” The presidency, maintained Michael Genovese and Thomas Cronin, supplies “our basic need for a visible and representative national symbol to which we can turn our hopes and our aspirations.” Consequently, presidents are often considered either national heroes or scapegoats based on people’s assessments of their performance and the nation’s political, economic, social, and moral conditions.¹⁴

Most pundits and ordinary Americans agree that presidents’ character—the underlying commitments and dispositions that shape people’s behavior—is at least as significant as their intellect, administrative abilities, or speaking talents. David McCullough insists that “character counts in the presidency more than any other single quality.” “In a president,” Peggy Noonan, a Reagan speechwriter, avows, “character is everything.” He or she “can employ wise and clever advisors.” However, a president must bring courage, decency, and a strong moral sense with him. While a “coherent political philosophy,” a strong grasp of issues, “an analytical mind,” “the ability to recruit and keep talented advisers,” outstanding communication skills, and the capacity to mold and mobilize public opinion are all important in a president, William Bennett asserts, character is paramount. James Pfiffner avers that good character includes “honesty, integrity, courage, loyalty, consistency,” and marital fidelity. Others add that a president’s personal ethics, candor, willingness to accept responsibility, and treatment of people are essential character traits.¹⁵

John Adams argued in 1765 that the American people had “an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible” right to know “the characters and conduct of their rulers.” John Jay wrote in *Federalist* 64 that he expected Americans to choose presidents “whose reputation for integrity inspires and merits confidence.” Through his character, Washington “endowed the presidency with the prestige” that has enabled the office to function effectively for more than 200 years, “despite the dubious conduct of some” of his successors. During the 1992 presidential campaign, George H. W. Bush repeatedly argued that Horace Greeley’s assertion that “fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing; only character endures” was “especially true in the Presidency.” Bush criticized his opponent, Bill Clinton, for claiming that “it’s not the character of the President but ‘the character of the Presidency’” that mattered.