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# WASHINGTON'S GOD: RELIGION, LIBERTY, AND THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY\*

*Michael Novak and Jana Novak*

## I. INTRODUCTION

I also give it in Charge to you to avoid all Disrespect to or Contempt of the Religion of the Country [Canada] and its Ceremonies. Prudence, Policy, and a true Christian Spirit, will lead us to look with Compassion upon their Errors without insulting them. While we are contending for our own Liberty, we should be very cautious of violating the Rights of Conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the Judge of the Hearts of Men, and to him only in this Case, they are answerable.

- Letter to Colonel Benedict Arnold,  
September 14, 1775<sup>1</sup>

In a wonderful little book on the War of Independence, the great historian Gordon Wood presents the most common view today:

It is true that many of the distinguished political leaders of the Revolution were not very emotionally religious. At best, they only passively believed in organized Christianity, and at worst they scorned and ridiculed it. Most were deists or lukewarm churchgoers and scornful of religious emotion and enthusiasm. Washington, for example, was a frequent churchgoer, but he scarcely referred to God as anything but "the Great Disposer of events," and in all his voluminous papers he never mentioned Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

That last claim is almost perfectly true, but not quite. In actual fact, Washington advised the chiefs of the Delaware tribe that they would do well to study and adopt "the religion of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Washington took a lifelong interest in Christian missions to the indigenous tribes of

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\* Excerpted from chapters 6, 7, and 8 of Michael Novak and Jana Novak's book entitled, *WASHINGTON'S GOD* (2006).

1. "To Colonel Benedict Arnold," September 14, 1775, *WGW* 3:492.
2. Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library Paperback, 2003), pp. 129–130.
3. "Speech to the Delaware Chiefs," May 12, 1779, *WGW* 15:55.

North America and even tried to secure government support for missionary efforts.<sup>4</sup> Yet, that omission noted, Wood's is a widely accepted historical account of the religion of the Founders.

It leads to the question asked by millions of visitors to Mount Vernon over recent years: What exactly were the religious views of George Washington? Was he really a deist? How did he actually picture God or think about him? Our examination of the evidence in preparing this [article] convinces us that Wood (along with many others) is not on target. But his is an understandable error. There does seem to be a mass of conflicting evidence.

### A. *Conflicting Evidence*

[Later], we will . . . look at Washington's strong position on religious liberty. That position requires him to seek a language at least a step removed from Christian language, in the direction of a more-or-less universal philosophical language of human nature, character, and virtue. Simultaneously, however, it required him to draw upon a specifically Jewish-Christian concept of God as Spirit and Truth, who most highly values liberty of conscience and the uncoerced worship of the heart.

Beyond that, from his Anglican pastor's point of view, Washington was one of the most regular, reliable, and generous of parishioners, a real leader of the parish over a great many years. And yet Washington was so loath to give any public signs of his confessional commitments that many ministers (who did not know him well) were suspicious that he was harboring a secret commitment to a broad latitudinarianism, which might even be construed as deist. Some *craved* a more visible sign of his Christian faith, which he consistently withheld.

That, then, is the major puzzle. On the one hand, George Washington was a leading member of his parish church, serving as a warden or a vestryman over a period of more than fifteen years. This freely chosen service imposed demanding responsibilities. It was not without some regards, but it nevertheless required significant expenditures of time, energy, and money.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, on the Sundays on which a minister was able to show up at Pohick Church (sometimes only once a month, so severe was the shortage of Anglican clergy), Washington and his family traveled some seven miles from Mount Vernon (a total round trip of about three hours) to attend divine service.<sup>6</sup> Less often, they drove the carriage nine miles to their second parish, in Alexandria, which Washington also supported with time and money.<sup>7</sup>

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4. "In the meantime, it will be a desirable thing for the protection of the Union to co-operate, as far as circumstances may conveniently admit, with the disinterested endeavours of your Society to civilize and Christianize the Savages of the Wilderness" ("To the Directors of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen," [sometime after July 10, 1789], WGW 30:355n).

5. Mary V. Thompson, "In the Hands of a Good Providence," pp. 63-65.

6. Thompson, "In the Hands," p. 76.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

On the other hand, some note that Washington did not regularly receive the sacrament of communion – but neither did many others at that time.<sup>8</sup> Some object that he was a member of the Freemasons for many years (although his attendance at lodge meetings was extremely rare),<sup>9</sup> and that that is incompatible with Christian belief. (Roman Catholics, even today,<sup>10</sup> are forbidden to belong to the Masons; in Europe, unlike in the United States, Freemasonry has been rabidly, sometimes violently, anti-Catholic.) But many American Christians then and now have found nothing incompatible between Freemasonry and Christianity and have looked at the former as a kind of service arm of the latter.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in Washington's day many bishops and clergy were active members of their local Masonic lodges.<sup>12</sup>

Many historians simply write Washington off as a deist. On the other hand, in not a few households around the land, even today, the following "Prayer of George Washington," with which George Washington concluded his Circular Letter to the States at the end of the war, hangs on a family wall. It is a very real prayer, as well as a public document:

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the States over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility, and pacific

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8. The most judicious treated of how often Washington received communion is found in *ibid.*, pp. 106-118.

9. "The Reverend G. W. Snyder," September 25, 1798, WGW 36:452.

10. "The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion." See the "Declaration on Masonic Associations," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, November 26, 1983, *Acta Apostolica Sedis*, Vol. 76 (1984), p. 300; *Documenta* 54.

11. "Freemasonry," writes Robert Micklus, was "first and foremost a form of clubbing in an age of clubbing . . . . In an age when clubbing really was the thing to do, being a Freemason – to Freemasons, at least – was as much a part of the social fabric of eighteenth-century life as being a member of a club such as Hamilton's Tuesday Club," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), p. 128. In addition, Steven C. Bullock says that American Masons "identified their order with the values of virtue, learning, and religion," *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 138. At the Boston Athenaeum, the senior author inspected the commemorative booklet for the one hundredth anniversary of Washington's induction into the Masons, held before a crowd of almost six thousand, at which the opening prayer concluded, "Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen." Robert B. Folger, *Address Delivered to the Members of Benevolent Lodge, No. 192, November 4, 1852, in Honor of the Memory of George Washington, an Active Member of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Free and Accepted Masons* (New York: C. Shields, 1852).

12. For a comprehensive account of bishops, priests, and prominent lay Episcopalians affiliated with the Masons, see Richard A. Rutyna and Peter C. Steward, *The History of Freemasonry in Virginia* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 167-171.

temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our Blessed Religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.<sup>13</sup>

Although we will discuss this prayer in greater detail [later], many of its features make it clearly Christian, not deist. It is fitting to say “holy” (“in his holy protection”) of the Jewish-Christian God, but not of the impersonal deist God. “Divine Author of our Blessed Religion” does not fit deism either. But it is a familiar locution among Christians, and it fits the God of Abraham, too.

Deist? Christian? Is it any wonder that people have trouble putting all these seemingly contradictory elements together?

Was Washington a kind of hypocrite, that is privately a deist, while hiding his private deism from the public? Was he, as some writers insist, a devout Christian believer?<sup>14</sup> Or was he, as other allege with equal fervor, a consciously dissenting man of the Enlightenment, a rationalist, with no trust whatever in miracles or in prayer?<sup>15</sup>

### B. *What's a Deist? The Deist Tendency*

Deism is the belief that by rational methods alone men can know all the true propositions of theology that it is possible, necessary, or desirable for men to know. Deists have generally subscribed to most of the following propositions, and have range widely from Christian rationalists to atheists:

1. One and only one God exists.
2. God has moral and intellectual virtues in perfection.
3. God's active powers are displayed in the world, which is created, sustained, and ordered by means of divinely sanctioned natural laws, both moral and physical.
4. The ordering of events constitutes a general providence.
5. *There is no special providence; no miracles or other divine interventions intrude upon the lawful natural order.* [Emphasis added.]

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13. “Circular to the States,” June 8, 1783, WGW 26:496. In some reproductions, the exact words of Washington are preceded by the traditional form of a public prayer in church, recast with the preface “Almighty God” and the closing, “Through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Neither of those phrases occurs in the original text, and insofar as they purport to quote Washington verbatim, such renditions are erroneous.

14. See, for example, Mason Locke (“Parson”) Weems, *The Life of George Washington*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Printed for the Authors, 1809); Edwards C. M'Guire, *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington* (New York: Harper, 1836); Willian J. Johnstone, *George Washington, The Christian* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1919); Janice T. Connell, *Faith of Our Founding Father: The Spiritual Journey of George Washington* (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2004).

15. See, for example, Franklin Steiner, *The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents* (Girard, Kans.: Haldeman-Julius, 1936); Gary Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984); Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness* (New York: Norton, 1996).

6. Men have been endowed with a rational nature that alone allows them to know truth and their duty when they think and choose in conformity with this nature.
7. The natural law requires the leading of a moral life, rendering to God, one's neighbor, and one's self what is due to each.
8. The purest form of worship and the chief religious obligation is to lead a moral life.
9. God has endowed men with immortal souls.
10. After death retributive justice is meted out to each man according to his acts. Those who fulfill the moral law are "saved," and so enjoy rewards; other are punished.
11. All other religious beliefs or practices conflicting with these tenets are to be regarded critically, as at best indifferent political institutions and beliefs, or as errors to be condemned and eradicated if it should be prudent to do so.<sup>16</sup>

Anyone today who held all these propositions would seem to be quite a religious person. That may be why even the least orthodox of the American Founders – Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin – left behind many passages far too religious for any self-respecting secularist today. The usual contemporary method for explaining away these religious passages in the Founders writings is to dismiss them as window dressing, intended to deceive the general public. That, of course, would make the Founders hypocrites in a most sacred matter, and deserving of popular disdain. But is the charge of mere window dressing even true? Not in the case of most of the Founders, as we believe has been shown in an earlier book, *On Two Wings*.<sup>17</sup> This charge of insincerity in matters of religion is certainly not true in the case of George Washington.

## II. NOT DEIST, BUT JUDEO-CHRISTIAN

I look upon every dispensation of Providence as designed to answer some valuable purpose, and hope I shall always possess a sufficient degree of fortitude to bear without murmuring any stroke which may happen, either to may person or estate.

- Letter to Lund Washington, May 29, 1779<sup>18</sup>

Our task now is to keep our focus on Washington's faith, and how Washington himself thought about God. How *must* Washington have been thinking of God, in order to speak of God as he did? What are the proper names he used? With what *verbs* did Washington describe the actions he attributed to God, or expected of God, or prayed God to carry out?

16. "Deism," *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 1 (New York: Scribner's, 1973), p. 646.

17. Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

18. GWG 15:180

### A. Amity Toward All

The God that Washington prayed to, and described in his public utterances, bears little resemblance to the watchmaker god of the deists. From the watchmaker god one does not expect miracles, and it would be quite futile (and naïve) to pray for a miracle. Washington's God, on the other hand, seems very like the Lord God described in the Hebrew Torah, historical books, and Psalms, who furthering his own designs interposes himself in history. Indeed, so clever an artist is this Jehovah that he does not ever need to perform miracles to achieve his purposes. All he needs to do is arrange contingencies so that human agents, acting under the general laws of nature, of their own free will make the decisions that accomplish this will. The enemy commander – if we may borrow an example from the sermon on the theme of Providence and in favor of independence, give by the president of Principle, John Witherspoon, on May 17, 1776 – falls ill of dysentery the morning of the battle, from quite natural causes, and for want of his leadership, the enemy suffers an unexpected defeat.<sup>19</sup> Contrarily, a betrayal of important secrets by a key officer may doom the Americans to unanticipated setbacks. In both good news and bad news, Washington saw, as Witherspoon did, the guiding hand of Providence. (It is likely that Washington knew this sermon, since it was distributed in pamphlet form to all five hundred Presbyterian parishes in the nation, and was translated into Dutch and widely commented on in Europe.) In the Continental Congress, Witherspoon served on committees of crucial importance to Washington, including the Board of War and the Committee on Foreign Affairs. At Princeton he had been the teacher of at least forty important figures in the founding period, including James Madison.

Although he appealed often to Providence, Washington was quite chaste in refraining from the use of more specifically Christian names for God, such as "Savior" and "Redeemer." Interdenominational rivalries were still, in 1770-1800, matters of considerable passion. Several of the individual American colonies had been expressly founded as a refuge for one group of religious believers (dissident Puritans, Catholics, Quakers) who were escaping persecution by other Christians (also represented in America). These passions were heightened by the rapid spreading of the new, enthusiastic religions from Great Britain, those of the Methodists and the Baptists.

By about 1810, these new evangelicals had doubled their numbers more than once and had dramatically transformed the religious landscape of the nation in a way that affected Washington's later reputation. They had even altered what it meant to be "Christian."

The new enthusiasm (for that is how they were regarded) thought that not only the Anglicans, but even members of the recent generation of New

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19. John Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 529-558.

England Puritans, such as John Adams, had slipped away from fundamental beliefs by allowing themselves a great deal of latitude in how they interpreted their faith. These "latitudinarians" tended to downplay the special language and creedal claims of Christianity, in favor of the philosophical terms shared with the ancient Greeks and Romans and with the "new science" represented by Isaac Newton and others. These latitudinarians were not quite deists, nor did they call themselves that; they were only "broad-minded" in the way they spoke about Christianity, especially in public. By contrast, the newly fervent Baptists and Methodists tended to regard the latitudinarians as missing the main point of Christianity altogether: salvation by faith in their Lord and Savior on the cross. The question "Washington, a deist or a Christian?" was to receive a new meaning in this new context. In this way, the Second Great Awakening, slowly gaining strength in the early nineteenth century, directly affected Washington's later religious reputation, by imposing on an earlier generation a new generation's standard for defining a Christian.

This slowly surging wave of new evangelical religion, which Washington included in his public respect for religious bodies, had by 1787 lent powerful support to the cause of religious liberty through opposing public establishments of particular churches, and insisting upon their own right to worship as they felt bound to do. This constructive effort allowed the authors of *The Federalist Papers* to note gratefully the remarkable unity among the American people and the wonderful harmony among factions at the Constitutional Convention, which could so easily have been at passionate variance with one another, and to describe it as a favor from Providence.<sup>20</sup> The variety of American denominations, obliged to live together in tolerance, were inculcating a new religious style, a new model of religious virtue: respect for one another across religious lines. Washington was particularly proud of his fellow Americans for their "liberality of sentiment toward each other which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this Country."<sup>21</sup> As he wrote to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, the new nation "afford edifying prospects indeed to see Christians of different denominations dwell together in more charity, and conduct themselves in respect to each other with a more christian-like spirit than they have ever done in any former age, or in any other Nation."<sup>22</sup>

To encourage this amity, dear to his heart, Washington avoided unnecessarily stoking theological rivalry. He found in traditional Hebraic terms for God room for substantial common ground among Protestants,

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20. "Let us pause, my fellow-citizens, for one moment over this melancholy and monitory lessons of history; and with the tear that drops for the calamities brought on mankind by their adverse opinions and selfish passions, lets our gratitude mingle an ejaculation to Heaven for the propitious concord which has distinguished the consultations for our political happiness," in *The Federalist Papers* (Number 20)), ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1961), p. 137.

21. PGW, *Pres. Series*, 7:61-62.

22. "Letter to the General Convention of Bishops, Clergy, and Leity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina," August 19, 1789, WGWS 30:383n.

Catholics, and Jews. If we pause here to list a few of the names for God employed by Washington throughout his public career, and even in his personal correspondence, we see his extraordinary effort to find language that all Americans could accept, without excluding anybody (except possibly thoroughgoing atheists, of whom at the time there were exceedingly few, if any).<sup>23</sup>

Almighty and Merciful Sovereign of the Universe  
 Creator  
 Divine Author of Our Blessed Religion  
 Hand of Heaven  
 Father of All Mercies  
 God  
 Great Lord and Ruler of Nations  
 Lord of Hosts  
 Supreme Being

### B. "Whose God is Jehovah"

At the first meeting of the Continental Congress, in September 1774, at the news of a sudden outbreak of war in Boston with so formidable a military power as Great Britain, the very first motion on the floor was a motion for a prayer to seek the guidance of Almighty God. Resistance immediately erupted – not because prayer was inappropriate, but because John Jay and others protested that they could not pray in the same terms as other people present (Anabaptists with Quakers, for example, or Congregationalists with Episcopalians, or Unitarians with Presbyterian). Sam Adams settled this dispute by announcing loudly that he was no bigot and could pray along with any minister so long as he was a patriot. In a deft touch, he proposed the Reverend Jacob Duché, Anglican minister of nearby Christ Church, who, Adams said, had a reputation for good judgment. The motion carried.

Wisely, the minister prayed from Psalm 35, whose verses had been chosen for that day by the Book of Common Prayer. All could pray the Psalms together. Thus he began:

Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me, fight against them that fight against me. Take hold and buckler

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23. The selections listed come from the following letters: "To the Emperor of Germany," May 15, 1796, WGW 35:46; "Proclamation," August 17, 1776, WGW 5:445; "General Orders," May 2, 1778, WGW 11:342-343; "To George Washington Parke Custis [stepgrandson of Washington]," November 28, 1796, WGW 35:283; "Circular to the States," June 8, 1783, WGW 26:496; "To Thomas McKean," November 15, 1781, WGW23:343; "To the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island," August 18, 1790, PGW *Pres. Series*, 6:285; "To George Washington Parke Custis [stepgrandson of Washington]," November 28, 1796, WGW 35:283; "Thanksgiving Proclamation," October 3, 1789, WGW 30:427-428; "Circular to the States," June 8, 1783, WGW 26:496; "General Orders," February 27, 1776, WGW 4:355; "To the Hebrew Congregation of Newport Rhode Island" [August 18, 1790], PGW *Pres. Series*, 6:285; "To the Ministers, Elders, and Deacons of the Reformed Church of Schenectady," June 30, 1782, WGW 24:391; "To Reverend Jonathan Boucher," May 21, 1772, WGW 3:84.

and shield, and rise up for my help . . . Say to my soul, "I am your salvation." Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life; let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me.

In a letter written to Abigail a week later, John Adams described the electrifying effect of that prayer:

You must remember this was the next Morning after we heard the horrible Rumour, of the Cannonade of Boston. I never saw a greater Effect upon an Audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning. After this Mr. Duché, unexpected to every Body struck out into an extemporary Prayer which filled the Bosom of every Man present. I must confess I never heard a better Prayer or one, so well pronounced. Episcopalian as he is, Dr. Cooper himself never prayed with such fervour, such Ardor, such Earnestness and Pathos, and in Language so elegant and sublime – for America, for the Congress, for The Providence of Massachusetts Bay, and especially the Town of Boston.

During this scene. George Washington prayed alongside Patrick Henry and Edmund Randolph, John Jay, Edward Rutledge, and Richard Henry Lee, some of whom had expressed reluctance to worship with those not of their faith. "It has had," as John Adams explained to his wife, "an excellent Effect upon every Body here."<sup>24</sup>

As some preachers of the revolutionary period liked to point out, even the moral language of the eighteenth-century philosophers – so insistent upon the role of desire and self-interest in corrupting the actual life of reason – confirmed, if it was not inspired by, the realism of biblical language concerning the pull of self-love, the flesh and worldly pride upon rational man and the ravages they wreak upon reason. On the other side of the ledger, many of the ministers in the pulpits of that period cherished a keen appreciation of reason construed as common sense and practicality and utility. They often quoted Algernon Sydney, John Locke, Cicero, and other philosophers, right along with their citations from the Bible.

Thus, for example, the two names Jefferson chose for God in his draft of the Declaration of Independence – "the *laws* of Nature and *Nature's God*," alluding to the great Lawmaker and Governor of the universe, and "endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable rights" (italics added) – unmistakably have both philosophical and biblical resonance. Similarly orthodox are the other two names insisted upon by the Congress, before they would sign their names to the Declaration: "appealing to the *Supreme*

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24. "Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams," September 16, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1963).

Judge of the word for the rectitude of our intentions” and “with a firm reliance on the Protection of *Divine Providence*” (italics added). That God identified as Divine Providence knows the name of every human being from before the founding of the world: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee” (Jeremiah 1:5). For that Providence, no detail is beneath notice. “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs on your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31).

The God to whom Washington prays, and to whom he urges other to pray, cannot be the God of deism; it is the God of the Hebrews. For Providence is the God who acts in history and interposes his power in human events. The Supreme Judge who examines the rectitude even of our secret intentions is also a highly personal God, whose actions are those of the biblical God. The watchmaker god of the deists is indifferent to human individuals and their intentions. The most extreme deist philosophers thought a judge of consciences far too human in shape. They despised such a God and ridiculed the very conception. Their hero was Newton the scientist (not Newton the Christian), and their god the god of reason, not the God of the Bible. The deist god had more the character of the ordered, indifferent, and distant stars than that of “the Supreme Judge of our intentions.”

In the letter he wrote as president to the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah, Washington, for his part, was quite clear about just who Providence is:

May the same Wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, and planted them in the Promised Land; whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous, in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven, and to make the inhabitants, of every denomination, participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the God of many official declarations, circulars, and decrees issued by Congress and by presidents is discernibly the God of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible. Americans are encouraged by the presidents and the House and Senate to pray to that God for the following (quite nondeistic purposes): to beg his forgiveness of the sins of citizens of all ranks, to urge his intervention so as to frustrate the aims of America’s enemies and to make prosper the efforts of American arms, to send a good harvest, and to spread a spirit of charity and cooperation among all citizens.

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25. “Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of the City of Savannah,” Georgia, [undated] *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1988), p. 549.

As the delegates to the Continental Congress put it in the Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1781, for instance, Americans owe a duty “with grateful hearts, to celebrate the praise of our gracious Benefactor; to confess our manifold sins; to offer up our most fervent supplications to the God of all grace, that it may please Him to pardon our offences and incline our hearts for the future to keep all his laws.”<sup>26</sup>

We saw [earlier] the seriousness of General Washington’s orders and exhortations to his officers and soldiers during the long years of the War of Independence. Indeed, General Washington sometimes expressed dismay that anyone could look upon the course of events without recognizing the many signal interpositions of Providence throughout the war. “The hand of Providence,” he wrote to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson after two years of hard campaigning, “has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations.”<sup>27</sup> As we shall see, Washington never lost his sense of wonder at the “invisible workings of Providence,” which had “conducted us through difficulties where no human foresight could point the way.”<sup>28</sup>

From his orders to his troops to the somber words on religion and morality in his Farewell Address as president, Washington taught the American public that free republican government depends upon the kind of liberty consistent with self-discipline and self-mastery, and that such liberty, in turn, for the vast majority of people (but perhaps not for a few persons “of peculiar character”), depends upon the support of religion. Washington knew people – elites, commoners, soldiers, tradesmen – as they are, especially under the extreme conditions of war. When he spoke of the need of most human beings for religion, as an adjunct to other motives for ethical conduct, he knew from harsh experience whereof he spoke.

### C. *Washington’s Struggle With Himself*

Both the writings of the ancients (especially military heroes) and of the Bible were storehouses of wisdom, and so Washington studied both. When he ordered busts and portraits for the ornamentation of his parlors at Mount Vernon, he chose exemplars of the use of power from across the centuries: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, Frederick II of Prussia. He also hung prominently on the wall of his large dining room, the most public room at Mount Vernon, two key portraits: the Virgin Mary and St. John.<sup>29</sup> He kept clearly in mind – and exemplified in his own speech and behavior – the twin message of the Bible: that men are capable of both brutishness and nobility.

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26. *Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of October 26, 1781*, in *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, ed. Worthington Chauncy Ford and Gaillard Hunt (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), pp. 1074-1076.

27. “Letter to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson,” August 20, 1778, WGW 12:343.

28. “Letter to Reverend William Gordon,” July 8, 1783, WGW 27:50.

29. Mary V. Thompson, “IN the Hands of a Good Providence” (publication forthcoming), pp. 94-96.

For Washington himself, calming his own inner furies had been an arduous task. As a young man, he had been quite prone to outbursts of anger, so he well understood that there was a war within himself. When his portraitist Gilbert Stuart commented to Washington at one sitting that he saw in him a greater tumult of temper and passion than in any subject that had ever sat for him, Washington nodded in recognition. Stuart also wrote to a friend:

All his features were indicative of the strongest passions, yet, like Socrates, his judgment and self-command made him appear of a different cast in the eyes of the world. . . . Had he been born in the forests. . . . he would have been the fiercest man among the savage tribes.<sup>30</sup>

Passionate men who strive for perfection often erupt in frustration at others, and, most of all, at themselves.

His love for classical models also led Washington to be impressed by the Masons in America, who were driven as he was by classical images, not least in classical architecture, and to be engaged in activities of considerable local benevolence. In some parishes, the Masons raised more funds and real goods for charities than the church did. (Often, of course, it was the same men who assisted in each effort.) The language of the Masons appealed to Washington – and it was not too far removed from the reasoned language of the Anglican “middle way.”

Washington himself confessed to old friends that the older he became, the more he recognized the workings of the Almighty in the affairs of men, far beyond human powers to comprehend. Although he never doubted the capacity of freemen to affect the course of events, Washington wondered at the seemingly trivial events that changed the entire direction of a battle and, at times, the fact of a nation. As he argued in 1793 to his friend David Humphreys, who, at the time of his letter, was Minister to Portugal:

If it can be esteemed a happiness to live in an age productive of great and interesting events, we of the present age are very highly favored. The rapidity of national revolutions appear no less astonishing, than their magnitude. In what they will terminate, is known only to the great ruler of events; and confiding in his wisdom and goodness, we may safely trust the issue to him, without perplexing ourselves to seek for that, which is beyond human ken; only taking care to perform the parts assigned us, in a way that reason and our own consciences approve of.<sup>31</sup>

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30. John Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution (1775-1783)*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 13.

31. “Letter to David Humphreys,” March 23, 1793, WGW 32:398.

Washington had witnessed many battles in which a seemingly insignificant, small deed had thrown apparent good fortune into reverse or apparent disaster into success – in one case, an intended minor ambush leading to the unexpected panic and rout of the opposing army; in another, one courageous squad standing firm against hosts; in still others, a ship laden with desperately needed munitions captured here, enemy dispatches intercepted there, the guns of Ticonderoga arriving in Boston in the nick of time. Such scattered deeds were impossible for generals to predict, impossible to control. Washington marveled at the scope of God's actions in the world, those actions that did not diminish human freedom but seemed to work around the edges of it. providence, as it were, allowed for chains of probabilities ("concatenations of events") to cross in wholly unforeseen ways, throwing the schemes of men off their intended paths.

Many preachers of the time – some of whom Washington heard in person – described Providence in such terms. "Special Providence," the mysterious but efficacious way in which God acts within history and among humans, without acting as puppeteer or trespassing upon individual freedom, was one of their favorite themes. Providence rejoices in humbling men when they are proud in their conceits, and even in trying the good man, to test his mettle. Often in the War of Independence the Americans fared better than they expected, and they gave thanks. When things went extremely badley, and all looked dark, still they trusted in Divine Providence. If hard things befell them, they took them as intended for their instruction. When good things befell them, they accepted them as an undeserved but gratefully received blessing.

For example, on December 18, 1777, while he and his impoverished soldiers endured the cold winds and snow of Valley Forge, Washington asked his men, under instruction from the Continental Congress, to observe a day of prayer and fasting, to give thanks to God for blessings already received, and to implore the continuing favor of Providence upon the American cause. That very day, heeding his orders, the Reverend Israel Evans, chaplain to the New Hampshire Brigade under Brigadier General Enoch Poor, delivered a sermon for the occasion, in which he praised the character of General Washington, while seeking to inspire his own brigade in a manner appropriate to a day of prayer and fasting. That sermon was printed and later sent to General Washington, who did not receive it until March 12. The very next day, Washington wrote his thanks to Rev. Evans, to congratulate him for "the force of the reasoning that you have displayed through the whole," and "to assure you, that it will ever be the first wish of my heart to aid your pious endeavors to inculcate a due sense of the dependence we ought to place in that all wise and powerful Being on whom alone our success depends."<sup>32</sup>

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32. "Letter to Reverend Israel Evans," March 13, 1778, WGW 11:78. This sermon was among the favorites that Washington had bound in hard covers for his library. The copy in the Boston Athenaeum is signed by Washington and bears pen marks that might be his.

Yet, however much he may have admired the force of Rev. Evans's reasoning, Washington retained a lifelong sense of the awesome mystery of Providence, above and beyond the power of reason itself. *Inscrutable* is among the adjectives that he most frequently associated with the divine, as we shall see at length [later].<sup>33</sup> Providence, Washington learned, often works "for wise purposes not discoverable by finite minds."<sup>34</sup> A personal God, the willful personal deity, the distance and limited creator of deists and skeptics, is predictable and regular. With his constant sense that "Providence works in the mysterious course of events,"<sup>35</sup> Washington was very far indeed from the epistemological starting point of most deists. They thought that revolution had to be judged by the standards of reason. With his powerful sense that "the will of Heaven is not to be controverted or scrutinized by the children of this world,"<sup>36</sup> Washington took an opposite approach. Reason could know only so much, he realized. Beyond that, there was only submission to the will of the one true sovereign.

#### D. Providence Rules The Stars, Not The Reverse

Still, as we have seen, most historians wish to give a deist interpretation to "Providence." This is difficult, for if there is one thing unadulterated deists do not believe in, it is a God who acts in history. The deist god is not omnipotent, but only potent enough to get the world going, as it were, and perhaps to sustain it in existence. Consider for a moment the twists and turns historians take to explain away Washington's many prayers and thanksgivings to Providence. The recent excellent biography by the distinguished historian Joseph Ellis carries this sentence: "Never a deeply religious man, at least in the traditional Christian sense of the term, Washington thought of God as a distant, impersonal force, the presumed well-spring for which he called destiny or providence."<sup>37</sup>

Although Washington did use both of these terms, evidence obliges us to see that he understood that the concept of *destiny* is not the same as *Providence*; to him they were two quite different ideas. Synonyms for *destiny* include *fate* and *fortune*, and there is no use praying to "destiny." But *providence* in Webster's<sup>38</sup> is either a synonym for *God* or means "divine guidance or care." At least in the Jewish and Christian scheme of

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33. See, for example, "To Burwell Bassett," April 25, 1773, WGW 3:133; "To John Augustine Washington," February 24, 1777, WGW 7:198; "To Bryan Fairfax," March 1, 1778, WGW 11:3; "To Reverend William Gordon," July 8, 1783, WGW 27:50; "To the Secretary of War," September 8, 1791, WGW 31:360; "To Elizabeth Parke Custis Law," March 30, 1796, WGW 35:1; "To Thaddeus Kosciuszko," August 31, 1797, WGW 36:22.

34. "To Governor Jonathan Trumbull," April 15, 1784, WGW 27:399.

35. "To William Tudor," August 18, 1788, WGW 30:55.

36. "To John Augustine Washington," January 27, 1793, WGW 32:315.

37. Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p. 151.

38. The first dictionary we checked was Webster's New International (2nd ed., 1960), which gives the following two definitions of *providence*: (a) "divine guidance or care" and (b) "God, conceived of as guiding men with his prescience, love, care, and intervention." The second dictionary we consulted was the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1971), which also gave two relevant definitions: (a) "the foreknowing and beneficent care and government of God (or of nature, etc.); divine

things, praying for God's guidance, care, or action on one's behalf makes a great deal of sense. But praying to "destiny" does not.

On the other hand, Providence may use a "kind of destiny" for its own purposes. It can do so, for example, in virtue of the talents it bestows on a person, her natural inclinations, and the circumstances in which it places her. In this sense, Washington wrote to Martha on June 18, 1775, "But it has been a kind of destiny, that has thrown me upon this service."<sup>39</sup> In his younger years, several observers noted that the young man seemed "destined" for greater things.

The key to the idea for Providence, as we shall see [later], is its break from the ancient idea of inexorable necessity. Providence is a sovereign God, who recognizes no limits in his care for details and particulars in the unfolding of human events, a sovereign who has particular love and benevolence toward humans, beginning with his own chosen people.<sup>40</sup> Such is the great God Jehovah, as Washington specified in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah.

Providence may use "destiny," as it may use "chance" – as it uses all things according to their own laws – for its own sovereign purposes. Yet in his confusion of providence with destiny, Ellis is not alone. The great Washington biographers James Thomas Flexner and Douglas Southall Freeman (and others) also try to make the two different concepts equivalent. In addition, they strike pretty much the same two notes as Ellis about Washington's state of soul: that he was not a very serious Christian but instead had the faith of a deist. Flexner and Freeman give these points a few paragraphs of serious attention, but some historians fire off that judgment without hesitation. Some have qualms about it and write tentatively. Few expend much effort exploring the issue. Most give the impression that religion, compared with other matters, is not very important.

Some historians make evidence that they fear religious interpretations of Washington more than they fear secular interpretations. "The reader should be warned," writes Flexner in a footnote, "that the forgers and mythmakers have been endlessly active in their efforts to attribute to Washington their own religious acts and beliefs. Prayers have been written for him, etc., etc."<sup>41</sup> But the biographers have also been endlessly active in

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direction, control or guidance" and (b) "hence applied to the Deity as exercising prescient and beneficent power and direction." The use of *providence* by Flexner, Freeman, Ellis, and others, therefore, seem out of step with common usage today, and they would seem to have been even more so in the period 1770-1799.

39. "Letter to Martha Washington," June 18, 1775, *GWG* 3:293-294.

40. Langdon Gilkey, late of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, who has written wisely about Christianity in America, provides an excellent account of the difference between fate and providence when, quoting St. Augustine, he writes, "[Let not astrologers] be imposing Fate on the Maker of heaven, the Creator and Ruler of the Stars. For te were from the stars, the Maker of the stars could not be subject to fate," in *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books [1959] 1969), pp. 23-24. Providence is sovereign over fate, not on an equal plane with it. In the same way, Washington prayer – not to fate, which would have been pointless – but to Providence.

41. James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: The Forge of Experience (1732-1775)* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 245n.

attributing to Washington instead a lack of faith in a creedal religion, a personal God, and an ethic of love, mercy, and sacrifice. They assign to Washington a Stoic but no a Christian faith. They say his life was governed by “the code of gentlemen” rather than the morality of Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

Biographers such as Flexner and Freeman find it odd that Washington sometimes referred to Providence as “he, she and it,” as if this variation were unorthodox.<sup>43</sup> But do they really think that orthodox Christianity and Judaism assigned a gender to the Creator, just as they would to a human being? On the contrary, in Jewish and Christian thought, God is beyond gender, “neither male nor female.” On the other hand, the Bible generally does prefer a personal pronoun for God, rather than an impersonal one. Thus, most texts in the Bible (but not all) refer to God in masculine terms, especially in the Christian testament, with its emphasis on Father and Son (rather than, say, Mother and Daughter). Christian writers – St. Augustine, for instance – write of God mostly in one gender, sometimes in another, with copious explanations as to why they do so. The Christian God is imagined to be a person (in a sense related to, but essentially different from, the way in which humans are persons). Yet even though the preference is almost always for a personal, rather than an impersonal, pronoun, the Anglican liturgy does say of the Holy Trinity, “May it be praised forevermore.”

Both Flexner and Freeman also find it odd that, as noted before, Washington speaks sometimes of Providence and sometimes of destiny. But any student of Western classics finds both terms in play, although typically in different contexts, and pointing to quite different concepts. For example, as we saw earlier, Washington writes of a “kind of destiny” that put him on track to be commander in chief. Here the natural term springs from the Greek and Roman idea of destiny, rather than Providence. Much against his own will, he expressed in a letter to Martha, it was Washington’s hope that his service “is designed to answer some good purpose.” That is, that it might serve the larger purposes of Providence.<sup>44</sup> If one wishes to emphasize poignancy and sweet pain, one writes helplessly of destiny. If one wishes to counsel trusting acceptance, one writes of Providence. One could say that Providence assigned Washington a unique destiny. It would be quite off to say that destiny assigned Washington a particular Providence.

Both Flexner and Freeman think that *Providence* is a more impersonal term than God. That seems exactly contrary to normal usage, at least in the Anglican and Catholic traditions. But it may occur because both of them, like Ellis, seem to associate *God* with “traditional” religion, perhaps of the more enthusiastic, heartfelt, devotional type well known in parts of

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42. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: Young Washington*, Vol. 2 (New York: Scribner’s, 1948), p. 397.

43. Flexner, *Forge of Experience*, p. 244; James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: Anguish and Farewell (1793-1799)* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 490.

44. “Letter to Martha Washington,” June 18, 1775, WGW 3:293-294.

America. From such religion, they are intent on dissociating Washington. For example, Flexner concludes: "Washington's religious belief was that of the enlightenment: deism. He practically never used the word 'God,' preferring the more impersonal word 'Providence.'"<sup>45</sup>

Flexner's comment is puzzling. The term *god* is quite ancient, since, in relevant philosophical contexts, we find it both in Greek and Latin pagan writings, and it may mean an impersonal force such as First Cause or Final End, or Pure Act, or the name for all the Energy from which the world comes to be, and toward which it rushes in return; it may even mean the living force in pantheism.

By contrast, to recognize the presence of Providence in every event of daily life, and in every place, requires a certain inward bowing of the head to his sovereignty. That attitude, when it is part of daily living and frequent prayer, brings Providence into a quite intimate personal relationship. This sort of personal relation was encouraged by the books available to Washington in his youth, Thomas Comber on the Book of Common Prayer as a daily guide, and Sir Matthew Hale's *Contemplations Moral and Divine*.

Washington had been taught that there is a Creator who knowingly intervened at a particular moment to create the world out of nothing and not acts as a daily Providence that intervenes regularly in history on behalf of those who turn to him, and who interposes himself in the course of events for his own ends.<sup>46</sup> Some of these events are admittedly tragic and the source of immense suffering (as in all ages), but they are always on behalf of his friendship with humans. These lessons sketch the main lines of Washington's repeated mentions of Providence. The relation in which Christians and Jews place Providence and those who trust it is palpably more personal than the ancient view of inexorable necessity, or the eighteenth-century deist view.

The Jewish and Christian version would have been very familiar to Washington from the Book of Micah and the Psalms, to both of which he often alluded in his own utterances. Washington would also have known from his education and reading that Greek and Roman gods also "intervened" in historical events, but not in the way that the God of Providence does. The Greek and Roman gods were described as being moved by human envies and passions and as involved in their own dramatic necessities. In the classical stories, they manipulated human beings as if the latter

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45. Flexner, *Anguish and Farewell*, p. 490.

46. An Anglican preacher of the era wrote, "Never perhaps had a human being a more vivid sense than Washington of that great truth which lies at the bottom of all our religion and all our joys; I mean, the belief in a particular Providence," citing then the divine care of the swallows (Matthew 10:29-42); see Mason Locke Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington; Dedicated to Mrs. Washington* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1918). See also Thomas Comber's reflections on providence, passim, in *Short Discourses upon the Whole Common Prayer* (1684) and notably: "[There is] no clearer acknowledgement of our Dependence [*sic*] upon God, nor more effectual means to procure all good Things, than publick or Common Prayer," and "Pray without ceasing: at least at all hours."

were puppets on strings. The God of the Hebrews and Christians, by contrast, has an infinitely more transcendent aim: the union of humans with himself, achieved only by and through free choice. Thus, his method of operation never deprives humans of their liberty but aims to enhance it. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).<sup>47</sup>

### E. Possibilities of Failure, Defeat, and Loss

Flexner, moreover, attributes to Washington a rather modern and panglossian view of the world: "Providence ruled the universe and, since Washington was dedicated to the conceptions of both virtue and progress, he could not but believe that virtue would in the deepest sense be rewarded, that although the means Providence pursued were often past the comprehension of humanity, everything would eventually prove for the best."<sup>48</sup> Flexner may possibly have in mind a passage from one of Washington's letters, quoted earlier, in which Washington stated that he would "not lament or repine at any act of Providence because I am in a great measure a convert to Mr. Pope's opinion, that whatever is, is right."<sup>49</sup> But this letter was composed in 1776, before the war turned truly desperate. It is telling that this tone is later moderated in Washington's writings: This was a man who, by dint of his own hard experience, learned that Providence leads into defeat as well as victory.

Washington was by no means certain that the War of Independence would automatically work out for the best, or that the courage his men showed at Valley Forge would ever be rewarded with success. Better than to gain success, he learned, is to live so as to deserve it, win or lose. To think otherwise would be tantamount to denying the sovereignty of God. And besides, it would take all the heroism and risk out of life, all the possibilities of nobility and tragedy and loss, and also true and proven faith. The ways of Providence, he came to understand, are mysterious, and far beyond the comprehension of our little human minds.

Washington was often haunted by the thought of how unlikely his successes were, and how probable his failures. He acted anyway. He did trust Providence, but he knew that to act is by no means to be certain of success. As he instructed his estate manager with regard to a "disaster" at home:

The first I submit to with the most perfect resignation and cheerfulness. I look upon every dispensation of Providence as designed to answer some valuable purpose, and hope I shall always possess a sufficient degree of fortitude to bear

47. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 299.

48. Flexner, *Anguish and Farewell*, p. 490.

49. "To Joseph Reed," March 7, 1776, WGW 4:380. Washington is referring to Alexander Pope's renowned *Essay on Man*, Epistle 1.x.289-294: "All nature is but art, known to thee;/ all chance, direction, which thou canst not see;/ All discord, harmony, not understood;/ All partial evil, universal good;/ And, spite of pride, in erring reason's pride;/ One truth is clear, whatever is, is right."

without murmuring any stroke which may happen, either to my person or estate, from that quarter.<sup>50</sup>

### F. *Prayer and Fasting*

Washington's own stepgranddaughter, Eleanor ("Nelly") Parke Custis, thought his words and actions in this respect were so plain and obvious that she could not understand how everybody did not see that he had always lived as a serious Christian. As she wrote to one of Washington's biographers:

It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o'clock, where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun, and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions, I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those, who act or pray, "that they may be seen of men." He communed with his God in secret.<sup>51</sup>

Nelly's last sentence goes beyond the "I never witnessed" she had just written a few words earlier. Even so, the other side of this argument needs to be placed squarely on the table. The reason why Nelly Custis wrote her letter is that some people did doubt, from the taciturnity and reserve that Washington had always maintained in public, whether – and to what degree – he really was a Christian. Public debated on this subject raged all through the nineteenth century. Washington was certainly not a showy Christian, nor a preachy one, nor a missionary, nor a frequent public expositor of exclusively Christian truths and sentiments. On the other hand, his parents were Christians, in visible practice he was an Anglican, and his descendents (via Martha's children) maintained the tradition and claimed him for it. On a few occasions, moreover, he did let slip his inner commitment to Christianity.

There was, for example, the occasion noted [earlier] on which he offered solemn and heartfelt advice to the Delaware chiefs: "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are. Congress will do everything they can to assist you in this wise intention; and to tie the knot of friendship and union so fast, that nothing shall ever be able to loose it."<sup>52</sup>

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50. "Letter to Lund Washington," May 29, 1779, WGW 15:180.

51. Jared Sparks, *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. 12 (New York: Harper, 1852), p. 406.

52. "Speech to the Delaware Chiefs," May 12, 1779, WGW 15:55.

One of Washington's descendants, the Reverend E. C. M'Guire, the son-in-law of Robert Lewis, listed a series of witnesses to Washington's prayers during the War of Independence, and earlier Colonel Temple, who served with Washington under Braddock, claimed that he saw Washington pray daily; Generals Knox and Porterfield during 1775-1783 and several orderlies, secretaries to Washington, and other staff officers saw or heard Washington in prayer. A half century later, the Anglican historian Philip Slaughter cited similar witnesses, only partly relying on M'Guire. Such witnesses claimed that the general preferred to pray quite audibly and was at times heard through the door of his quarters or the canvas of his tent. Some reported catching him on his knees when, thinking he has called out, they opened his door to deliver a communication.<sup>53</sup>

For the most part, though, Washington demonstrated a commitment to considerable privacy about his own deepest religious beliefs and sentiments. Such privacy and undemonstrativeness was not uncommon for Anglicans of his time and station, although some Virginian Anglicans did write movingly of their religion and their spiritual struggles, at least in letters and diaries, such as Washington's best friend, Bryan Fairfax, and the famous governor of Virginia Patrick Henry. In nearly the whole communion there was resistance to "enthusiasm" and "show," and a preference for decorum and formality, in the manner of the highly polished Anglican liturgy whose words were centuries old and allowed little room for improvisation. In feeling, the style was decidedly not Baptist, nor even Methodist. That Washington could spend a whole day in prayer and fasting, and that he frequently attended church (but not communion) with Martha on Sundays,<sup>54</sup> and that he was unusually faithful to his duties as vestryman (attending twenty-three out of thirty-one possible meetings during his term of office, which in part embraced his period of military service), may have said enough, in his mind, about his seriousness in matters religious: His pastor, Lee Massey, praised him highly on this account, according to Anglican historian Philip Slaughter.<sup>55</sup> Most laypersons are not, after all, monks. One must allow laypersons to live as laypersons, even when they are serious about their faith.

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53. E. C. M'Guire, *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1847), pp. 17ff, 158ff.; also Philip Slaughter, historian of the Diocese of Virginia, in *Christianity: The Key to the Character and Career of General Washington: Discourse to the Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association, May 30, 1886*, especially pp. 32-33. In our judgment, M'Guire and Slaughter wrote less as historians than as proponents, and their citations and interpretations need to be read critically. M'Guire's testimony is important as a reflection of the thinking of the Washington family (and the women friends of Betty, Washington's sister) about the religion of their most famous relative. Slaughter is significant for covering the lore of Washington's own church, the Anglican Church of Virginia. These factors may bias the case made by both. On the other hand, if the Anglicans disowned Washington, or the family tried to "explain him away" as a religious aberration, then Washington's reputation, then and now, would look very different indeed.

54. Thus did Washington record in his diary for 1774: "June 1st. Went to Church and fasted all day." DGW 3:254.

55. Slaughter, *Christianity: The Key to the Character and Career of General Washington*, p. 30.

While continuing to deny Washington's religious seriousness, biographer Freeman testifies to his self-control, spotless reputation, and even chastity:

Although there was no compelling faith in God, principles of right conduct prevailed: there is no echo of any scandal, no hint of a breach of accepted morals, no line of obscenity, no reference to any sex experience, no slur on any woman otherwise than in reference to those who might be demoralizing his troops.<sup>56</sup>

Yet Washington was neither prude nor hermit, but a lively man of the world, who was at the same time always aware of his duties and obligations. One of those duties entailed living as a good Christian ought to live, even to the point of not allowing his religiousness to show itself before others, but mainly in private, where, as he knew, God was quite capable of seeing. The whole picture of his religious life is, alas, not open to the rest of us; we see only fragments.

As the dictionaries of ideas we cited [earlier] make clear, there were many Christians who for various reasons presented themselves to the world as deists. This appearance could be a matter of attitude, style, and manner rather than a commitment to deism in its strong sense (a denial of particular Providence). A Christian might well, for instance, express in public – even when most of the public was itself quite Christian – only those commitments that lend themselves to explanation in terms of reason alone, without meaning to limit his whole life only to those tenets. There might be many reasons for so doing, in order not to exclude those of other beliefs, for instance.

Washington, however, often went beyond that, making statements whose full sense becomes clear only when one perceives their Christian provenance. His principles of religious liberty were one such instance. To interpret these principles merely in a deist way is to miss their full sense, and to misread his behavior. He was a professed Anglican and, like many Anglicans in Virginia of his generation, rather more of the “latitudinarians” than “evangelical” style.

Thus, Washington plainly ran the risk of having many persons think him less Christian than he was. Even under provocation he retained the reserve that he had early chosen about his personal beliefs. Thus, that reserve, alas, does not allow us now to call him a fully witnessing, fully expressive Christian. Yet his conduct and his words resonate with a profound appropriation of traditional Christian ethics and concepts. To be sure, these are older Christian terms with a decidedly Hebraic cast, expressed in a preference for the language of the Psalms and Micah and the other Prophets, more often than in the tender terms of attachment to Christ. The note of tenderness did appear, but more rarely, as when he commended to

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56. Freeman, *Young Washington*, pp. 387-388.

the governors of the states the brotherly love and the "Charity, humilty, and pacific temper of mind" of the "Divine Author" of our religion.<sup>57</sup>

### G. *The Providential Nation*

Finally, a word must be said about the tradition of seeing Providence in the affairs of the American colonies. This tradition was as old, of course, as the Puritan colonies of New England. But it really began to go nationwide, scholars say, during the thirty years just after Washington's birth in 1732. Indeed, young Washington's own exploits along the Monongahela had something to do with his gathering sense of a providential destiny for a whole people. In the 1750s, the threat of French supremacy bearing down on the East Coast colonies from the westward forests, along with the war parties of Indians mobilized by the French against the British settlers on the frontier, alarmed Americans. Since the danger of attacks from the French and Indians affected all the frontier states, not just one, individual colonies began to sense a common need. This alarm fed the first blooming of a sense of national unity. A new sort of meta-story began taking shape to explain what the colonists were experiences, a new sense of all being in this together – not just building little communities as enclaves for their own protection, but as in need of a common defense and, ultimately, as a new national experiment for all humankind.

George Washington entered upon the public stage just as the colonies were falling under the sway, in terms spread by the evangelists of the Great Awakening (1740-1763), of a new collective story, a story of freedom, a story of suffering and judgment to come, and a story of God's blessing on a particular people. Not yet a nation, still, many Americans were beginning to sense a national call to make real in history the intention God had hidden since before the beginning of the world: the story of universal human liberty. And so Washington pointed out in his "Circular to the States" at the end of the war:

The citizens of America are from this period, to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity.

In this state, American had been favored more than any other nation with respect to its system of liberty. As Washington's eye swept the globe, it also swept back in time:

Nothing can illustrate these observations more forcibly, than a recollection of the happy conjecture of times and circumstances, under which our Republic assumed its rank among the Nations. The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at

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57. "Circular to the States," June 8, 1783, WGW 26:496.

an Epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period.

Then Washington listed various forms of progress that had altered the world:

. . . the growing refinement of Manners, the growing liberality of Sentiment, and above all, *the pure and benign light of Revelation*, have had ameliorating influence on *mankind* and *increased* the blessings of Society. [Emphasis added.]<sup>58</sup>

Yet the Washington who wrote these lines in 1783 never forgot the disease, misery, icy cold, and horrible wounds that his army suffered through in the long years of war. Washington's story of Providence is not solely a triumphal story. On the contrary, it is, as President Abraham Lincoln reflected on it in his own second inaugural address, far more steeped in suffering and bloodshed than any of those who were protagonists in the Civil War had earlier dreamed. The God of Providence is just, but not vindictive, and his aim is reformation and new beginning, not destruction. But his justice is far from demanding, more terrible, than many have the courage to imagine.

The Providence that ruled over Valley Forge and six years of frequent retreats and constant bloody and gangrened wounds, the Providence that ruled over Bull Run and Antietam and the Wilderness with their hundreds of thousands of fallen and shattered bodies – that Providence was not the rational God of deism but the just God of the terrible swift sword, who tramples, still today, on the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. In the dark years 1776 and 1777, Washington drank from the same cup handed down to Lincoln.

The historians, we think, underestimate the depths of Washington's soul. Washington plumbed the depths of his men's capacity to suffer, in the name of liberty, under the hard judgments of the Providence that blessed them, yes, but only at the cost of blood and, for very many, life itself. This was a tough man. As his God was a tough God.

The toughness of Washington's faith, the evidence shows, was an important key to his equanimity in defeat and weary despair, as well as in victory and exultation. We shall look into Washington's idea of God [later]. Meanwhile, we turn to the understanding of God behind his public statements, and then in his private life.

### III. WASHINGTON'S PUBLIC PRAYERS

*No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have*

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58. "Circular to the States," June 8, 1783, WGW 26:485.

*advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.*

Washington's First Inaugural Address,  
April 30, 1789<sup>59</sup>

For generations, Christians have rejoiced in the private prayers attributed to Washington on his knees at Valley Forge and elsewhere. These were personal prayers, the existence of which has been disputed by later historians for lack of documentary records from verifiable eyewitnesses, and out of suspicion about the reliability of Parson Weems and other early biographers. Without relying upon those disputed accounts, however, it may be useful to consider documents of Washington that are clearly on the public record. The question we now want to ask of these documents is this: What is the concept of God that makes sense of what Washington asked from God, in public documents issued under his own name?

We think it best to go paragraph by paragraph through these public prayers, pausing each time to bring to light some of the implications of what we have just read. For sometimes words are so familiar to use that, in the light of other possible ways of understanding them, we do not grasp their whole significance. We must remember, for instance, that most historians read these texts as if Washington was a deist. But these public prayers, read carefully, cannot possibly be deists prayers, even when *deist* is meant in the broadest possible sense. On the contrary, they read as though they were prayers to the quite familiar God of the Bible.

In short, as we read these prayers, we think it wise to keep in mind the following principle of interpretation: The *names* by which Washington addressed God are nonsectarian, nondenominational names, whose high level of abstraction makes them seem deist. But the *verbs* Washington used for the actions he was asking God to perform describe an outline of God that is very like the Hebrew God, the God of Prophets and the psalmist, as well as the God of Jesus and his disciples. It seems obvious that the nouns must be understood in the light of the verbs. The nouns may *sound* like deist names, but they must be interpreted in the light of the actions that were assigned to them.

The first of Washington's public proclamations we examine in his Thanksgiving Proclamation of October 3, 1789.

#### A. *The Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789*

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their

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59. "First Inaugural Address," April 30, 1789, WGWS 30:293.

joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form a government for their safety and happiness.”

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religions and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and Us, and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.<sup>60</sup>

Washington asserted “the duty of all nations” in regard to God. Is it really true that whole nations, as distinct from the individuals who make them up, have duties? That would seem to create a number of problems for a pluralistic nation, in which various peoples see their duties in one way,

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60. WGW 30:427-438.

and others in another. Many today are certain that *individuals* have duties toward God. Yet most have a harder time imagining how nations do, and how nations would best fulfill such duties if they did. Yet whatever we today may say, or think, Washington wrote, "It is the duty of nations." That is a very strong claim. The very same claim was also made by Lincoln some generations later and has been repeated by other presidents and public figures since.

A God to whom whole nations have duties would seem to be a very special kind of God. It would be odd to imagine whole nations having a duty toward the god of deism, for instance. Such a god is not a person or a judge or even a creator of all things. *Creator* seems too anthropomorphic a conception, too magical, for the sort of law-like, rational governor of all things – the immanent spirit in all things – that the deists had in mind. Contemplating the orderliness of the stars in the black night, the regularity of the seasons, and the beauty of mathematics, many astute minds of the eighteenth century had no difficulty sensing a kind of universal rational spirit penetrating all things. They thought of this being as the "god of nature," the rational god of mathematicians and physicists.

The law of nature, such as the laws of geometry and mathematics, biology, and perhaps even psychology, understood in a scientific sense – these a deist might recognize, metaphorically, as "nature's laws" or even "god's will." But to imagine that god has a will independent of laws that reason has uncovered would seem to a deist more like superstition than like religion, and quite unworthy of a fully reasonable human being.

"To humbly implore his protection and favor" must also seem to a deist a childish and immature fantasy, a protection of infantile desire, such as Sigmund Freud was a century later to portray in *The Future of an Illusion*. Yet here was the practical farmer and soldier, General Washington, and then President Washington, asserting such fantasies as solemn duties to be observed throughout the land. Such notions do not accord with the deistic conception of god. To the deist sort of god there would be no point in prayer. Such a god works no miracles and plays no favorites. One might cherish toward the deist god a sense of awe, even reverence, but to imagine that one might ask favors of it would be a bit naïve, as if one were imagining god to be some sort of humanlike being. This would be to fail to grasp the remoteness and vastness and impersonality of the god of nature.

The first duty that Washington said nations were expected to perform toward God was "to acknowledge God." But why would nature's god, so vast, cold, and indifferent, need acknowledgement by such as we, mere passing specks in the universe? By contrast, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus does insist that whole nations, as well as individuals, should become conscious of what he has done for them – to pay attention, to acknowledge him and heed him.

Notice also the three other duties of nations toward God: not only "to acknowledge His providence," but "to obey his will"; next, "to be grateful for his benefits"; and, finally, "to implore" his protection and favor. To pay

attention to his acts of providence, to obey, to be grateful, and to implore his favor – duties such as these suggest something very like the Jewish and Christian God, and not at all the god of the scientists and deists.

The second paragraph of Washington's address also deserves comment. The president urged a whole day of prayer and thanksgiving to be set aside. And he particularly urged it to be observed with sincerity – and something more than sincerity: "our sincere and humble thanks." He urged his fellow citizens to acknowledge "the signal and manifold mercies." That word *signal* was a special favorite of Washington's (and some of the other Founders). By *signal* they seem to have meant "stand out," "flash," like a light from a lighthouse. You can't miss this signal in the darkness. It was *meant* to stand out. It is part of a pattern, a sign of favor and blessing, a sign intended to encourage a people in dark hours.

*Signal mercies* – those that stand out. Many such events from the War of Independence remained vivid in Washington's mind for many years afterward. It was as if he had seen the hand of God intervening in human affairs with his own eyes. He spoke next of "the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war." Note the strong word *interpositions*. In other words, Providence rearranged things, intruded in their positions. And for Washington, this was not a matter of speculation. He called it a matter of "experience."

More than once, Washington commented that it would take a particularly hard-hearted man not to notice and not to be grateful for favors rendered, in such extreme circumstances, when life or death hung in the balance, and liberty's success or failure was at stake. The implication here was that God, the Almighty, the Governor of the universe, the Author of all good things, *cared* about the cause of liberty and those who committed themselves to that cause.

In his second paragraph, Washington also characterized the God he was invoking, so that the citizens of the United States would not mistake who he meant. He asked the people of the United States to devote Thanksgiving Day "to the service of this great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be." Washington's God is the Maker of all good things, in short, a God who is good, beneficent, great, and glorious, and who is to be thanked for "his kind care" of the American people, even his "protection" of them in all those years "previous to their becoming a Nation." So this is a God who watches over his favored people down the years, a God with a historical view and interposing care, a God of "signal and manifold mercies," that is, mercies that extend in every direction, as here enumerated. In addition, this God is "the Lord and Ruler of Nations." And Washington urged Americans to beseech him to do some amazing things: to pardon their sins, their national sins and their private sins; to enable them all, in public and in private duties, to perform those duties properly and punctually; and to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations. What sort of deism was it that would expect God to keep an accounting of "sins," whatever those might

have been to a deist, and far more than that, to be able to pardon sins? There is no greater attribute of God than that he is able to make sins disappear, simply wipe them away. That is an act of Spirit and Truth, not of material power.

Moreover, in asking God to protect and guide other nations, Washington singled out “especially such as have shown kindness to us.” In other words, God should be favorably disposed not only to America, as shown by his signal acts on its behalf, but also toward its friends.

Just to recognize this long list of actions that God had taken on America’s behalf, as Washington did, is to grasp the point that Jesus made when he instructed his followers to pray in “the Lord’s Prayer”: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Even the humblest events in our lives are within the Father’s caring. Every good thing – all the things we need – come from him.

At this point, as if to make sure that people did not imagine this “Being” as abstract and remove, Washington reminded the nation that many discreet but crucially important human events and turns of nature that had made possible its independence and the happy formation of its Constitution and forms of government. He minded Americans that these humble realities were gifts. And Americans must, as decent creatures must, acknowledge God’s care with heartfelt thanks. In short, the God of Washington reaches down into history, onto *this* battlefield, to protect *this* man and that, *this* outpost and that, and *this* turn of the tide, and *this* outcome of the war. Not a remote God, but a God present every day, in every need. A God whose “interpositions” on America’s behalf Washington had experienced.

We recall Washington’s gratitude to Providence for sparing him in the battle on the Monongahela led by General Braddock, though his coat was riddled with bullets, and his horses were shot from under him – a care and protection before the United States had become a nation. And as John Jay had noted in *The Federalist* (Number 2), Providence had “in a particular manner blessed it with a variety of soils and productions and watered it with innumerable streams for the delight and accommodation of its inhabitants.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Providence had given “this one connected country to one united people – a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, profession the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, [and] very similar in their manners and customs.” There was also its traditions of liberty under law. All these were true blessings.

And then there were “the signal interpositions” of God’s providence at the Battle of Long Island and likewise at so many other battles – the capturing of the enemy’s plans, sudden favorable turns in the weather, and the overcoming of many hazards (not least, premature discovery) in the bold nighttime raid across the icy Delaware.

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61. *The Federalist Papers* (Number 2), ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Mentor, 1961), p. 6.

Washington could not stop himself from mentioning, too, “the conclusion of the late war” – recalling the event at Yorktown he had spent years waiting for – the moment the enemy fell into the same traps as he himself had, when he put his vulnerable troops upon Long Island and found himself shut in a vise between two forces, escaping only by a sort of miracle. For the British fell into a similar trap on the peninsula at Yorktown, when Washington quickly snapped closed the trap by land, and the French fleet snapped it shut by sea. And the British experienced no interposing miracle.

Washington had often counted his blessings, privately and publicly (although we know more about the latter). He meant to teach the new citizenry he led the habit of doing the same. His main underlying task as first chief magistrate of the land, he knew, was to establish lasting traditions that would befit a citizenry worthy to be free, and apt to maintain its liberties.<sup>62</sup>

Washington had also come back from retirement, reluctantly at first, in order to help bring the new nation out of the disunity into which it had fallen – so swiftly – after the successful conclusion of the war. Many in Europe were mocking America, so lightly ruled by the kind of England, and now so badly ruled by its own so-called self-government. All Washington’s efforts in the field, all the suffering of his men, were coming to seem in vain. And so he had joined the Constitutional Convention and risked his future reputation on the squabbling of the same sort of representative politicians who, after all their solemn promises, had not been able to raise funds for his army, or to treat his men honorably.

Then he saw another kind of miracle happen, the writing of a brilliant Constitution in the mere fifty-three days. And for these great blessings, too, rising out of the troubles that might have endured, he asked his people to give thanks: “for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted.” From this Constitution there flowed blessings almost unparalleled among the nations of this earth: “for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed.” It was for this, above all, that Washington had watched his amateur army fight so hard, suffer so much, and, in heavy numbers, die.

Washington did not forget those other, seemingly more secular blessings, which in his eyes also counted as gifts of the Author of all goods: “and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.” Americans in those days had much to be thankful for, and knew it. Their sentiments and their ways of expressing it, led by their president, had many precedents. They imitated similar scenes in the Bible. They

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62. Matthew Spalding, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell and the National Character* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); see especially Chapter 2, “Establishing the National Character,” pp. 9-47.

were not out of tune with the gratitude the small band sheltering in the tiny *Mayflower* offered upon reaching this land in 1620.

Washington's proclamation then continued: "And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions." As we have seen, it would be something of a superstition for strict deists to offer, humbly or otherwise, "prayers and supplications" to a god who is impersonal, indifferent, and quite remote from human needs or feelings. But to "beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions" would blow the fuse of any deism worthy of its name. What "transgressions" of humans, let alone with "national transgressions," could possibly be of interest to an impersonal and remote cause of being? If one believed in sins and their forgiveness, there was no point in being a deist. One might as well be a Jew or a Christian.

But the president pressed on in the matters for which the citizens should implore God, at least as he conceived of God:

. . . to enable use all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord.

In the last sentence of his proclamation, Washington asked God for one more thing, an amazing thing: "to promote the knowledge and practice of *true* religion and virtue," as if to make clear that there were *false* religions, too, and false ways of being religions, and that from these, too, Americans needed to be protected. The introduction of the concept of truth to a commitment to religion is a very notable step.

From this proclamation we learn that the God to whom Washington bade the nation pray was at one and the same time the God of all mankind, who had all in his care, and also the God who had a special kind of care for the people of the United States, both singly and as a whole. He was a God who watched over historical events and interposed his mercies among them. He forgave sins, and he was to be implored, obeyed, thanked, and honored. He was to be honored by individuals in their private capacities and also in their corporate and public capacities, as a whole nation. We may leave it to the reader to compare Washington's idea of God with the god of deism. The Psalmist of David would have been familiar to Washington from his youth, since the Psalms figure prominently in the everyday liturgy of the Anglican church. We believe that an attentive reader will recognize in them the precursor of Washington's Thanksgiving reflections. Here, for instance, is Psalm 67, verses 1-6:

God be merciful to unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us . . .

That thy way may be known upon the earth, thy saving health among all nations.

Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.

O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon the earth . . .

Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.

Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.

### *B. The Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1795*

There is a second Thanksgiving Proclamation that particularly bears reflection in the light of our central inquiry: Who *was* Washington's God? Let us attend to this much neglected proclamation for briefer comment:

When we review the calamities which afflict so many other nations, the present condition of the United States afford much matter of consolation and satisfaction. Our exemption hitherto from foreign war, an increasing prospect of the continuance of that exemption, the great degree of internal tranquillity we have enjoyed, the recent confirmation of that tranquillity by the suppression of an insurrection which so wantonly threatened it, the happy course of our public affairs in general, the unexampled prosperity of all classes of our citizens, are circumstances which peculiarly mark our situation with indications of the Divine beneficence toward us. In such a state of things it is in an especial manner our duty as a people, with devout reverence and affectionate gratitude, to acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God and to implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience.

Deeply penetrated with this sentiment, I, George Washington, President of the United States, do recommend to all religious societies and denominations, and to all persons whomsoever within the United States to set apart and observe Thursday, the 19th day of February next, as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, and on that day to meet together and render their sincere and hearty thanks to the Great Ruler of Nations for the manifold and signal mercies which distinguish our lot as a nation, particularly for the possession of constitutions of government which unite and

by their union establish liberty with order; for the preservation of our peace, foreign and domestic; for the seasonable control which has been given to a spirit of disorder in the suppression of the late insurrection, and generally, for the prosperous course of our affairs, public and private; and at the same time humbly and fervently to beseech the kind Author of those blessings graciously to prolong them to us; to imprint on our hearts a deep and solemn sense of our obligations to Him for them; to teach us rightly to estimate their immense value; to preserve us from the arrogance of prosperity, and from hazarding the advantages we enjoy by delusion pursuits; to dispose us to merit the continuance of His favors by not abusing them; by our gratitude for them, and by a correspondent conduct as citizens and men; to render this country more and more a safe and propitious asylum for the unfortunate of other countries; to extend among us true and useful knowledge; to diffuse and establish habits of sobriety, order, morality, and piety; and finally, to impart all the blessings we possess, or ask for ourselves, to the whole family of mankind.<sup>63</sup>

A deist would be unlikely to see signs of “Divine beneficence” in exemption from foreign wars, internal tranquility, the suppression of an insurrection, and an unexampled prosperity. We need not doubt that Washington, as well as the deist, recognized that these events had natural and human causes. Yet he clearly believed that even natural causes worked from the web of God’s power and causation, in such a way that in recognizing the power of nature, one also recognized one’s duty of gratitude to the powers of the Creator. Washington himself explained the relation of nature to God’s action in terms of the “contingencies,” “concatenation of causes,” and “circumstances” through which Providence acts in human history, as we shall see [later]. such ideas had deep roots in Christian theology and standard preaching in the Anglican church, at least since Richard Hooker (1554-1600).

In giving thanks to God at meals, for instance, one gives thanks to the farmers, millers, and bakers who brought the bread to the table, as well as to the Almighty, who blessed the harvests, tempered the weather, and fashioned the world in such a way that food on the table and mutual dependence were normal. It was not as if such causes – God and the baker – competed against each other. Although a crucial part of the bread came from the baker, the way all such things worked together was due to the sort of world that God conceived of, executed, and approved.

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63. “Proclamation of Thanksgiving and Prayer,” February 17, 1795, in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. William Richardson (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. 171-172.

It is also apparent in this Thanksgiving Proclamation that we have many and varied obligations to the Almighty. Washington describes them as if such obligations are relations of duty between persons. He seemed to imagine God as a person capable of hearing prayer and, as he saw best, responding to them. For our part, Washington tells us, as he saw best, responding to them. For our part, Washington tells us, we ought “to acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God and implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience.” We already have experience of those blessings. But their continuance depends, in some way that we do not see, upon our fulfilling “our many and great obligations” to the Almighty. “Ask and it shall be given unto you,” Jesus taught us (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9; John 16:24). Washington seems to be heeding that lesson, in urging us “to implore” the Almighty to continue the blessings for which we thank Him.

The president then urges citizens to meet together and offer “sincere and hearty thanks to the Great Ruler of Nations,” a vast and great God, indeed. And why? Because of – here comes one of Washington’s signature phrases again – “the manifold and signal mercies which distinguish out lot as a nation.” In the case of the United States, the mercies of God, which are abundant to every nation, nonetheless here stand out, distinguish us among the nations, and discernibly make our lot special, as immigrants constantly experience. These blessings impose special obligations of thanksgiving upon us, as well as faithfulness to our duties, lest we lose such blessings.

Washington then lists our reasons for gratitude, including “the preservation of our peace . . . the seasonable control which has been given to a spirit of disorder . . . and . . . for the prosperous course of our affairs.” And lest we lose these benefits, Washington rushes us onward to “beseech the kind Author of these blessings graciously to prolong them to us” and “to dispose us to merit the continuance of His favors.”

And just how shall we “merit” these great goods? “By not abusing them; by our gratitude for them, and by a correspondent conduct as citizens and men.” Not exactly a light task, all that.

Washington’s prayers are not exactly self-centered, complacent, or arrogant prayers. They are generous, embracing the whole word in their supplications. They are self-critical, urging all fellow citizens to demean themselves humbly, and to do their duty with regularity, to mind their daily habits and those of their children, and to give thanks, constantly to give thanks. Not bad prayers at all. and to come back to the point of our inquiry: These are not the prayers of a deist, let alone a secular humanist.

### *C. The Circular to the States of 1783*

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would include the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate

a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our Blessed Religion, and without an humble invitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.<sup>64</sup>

Because of its continued popularity today, we want to touch again on this “circular,” a third public prayer of Washington’s that deserves reflection, a few words at a time. The circular was written by Washington while he was still commander of the Continental Army and was addressed to the governors of all the states, since Washington was about to retire from command. Its concluding paragraph begins with these words: “I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside in his holy protection,” a turn of thought that makes no sense from a strictly deist point of view. One clue is “holy protection,” since no one supposes that the deist god is “holy.” The second is the very notion that the deist god picks favorites in history.

What follows is not a white more deist:

. . . that he would include the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field.

These phrases, too – about obedience to rulers, and about love – sound closer to certain passages in the Epistles of St. Paul and much more Christian than deist.<sup>65</sup>

The next passage is indisputably biblical in its tone and phraseology: “and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy.” The words recall the question of the prophet Micah (6:8), who asked, “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” And then the final appeal includes this unmistakable evocation:

. . . and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were Characteristicks of the

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64. “Circular to the States,” June 8, 1783, GWG 26:496.

65. See, for example, Romans 13:1-14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation.

Washington, it seems, meant without equivocation to point to Jesus Christ, although by indirection, by tying "Divine Author of our blessed Religion" to those traits of the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount by which Christ is most distinguished among men. These very last words also call to mind Washington's advice to the Delaware chides, that if they would be a happy nation, they ought to learn the religion of Jesus Christ. The "Divine Author of our blessed Religion" – not just our religion but "our *blessed* Religion" – is Jesus Christ, who calls us to imitate him with humility, and to walk in his example. This, too, is far from deist.

Is it necessary for anyone in a biblically literate age to ask of which religion is it that its founder is divine, and distinguished by the following "Characteristicks": charity, humility, a pacific temper of mind, and a wish that his disciplines would offer a humble imitation of his example in the word?

Deism, you say?

#### IV. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Looking at the record of Washington's public prayers, which in every important particular are backed up by private expressions of faith in his correspondence and personal writings, the historian who claims that Washington was a deist is flying in the face of a mountain of evidence. Yet to concede this is not to concede that Washington was quite the explicit and fully orthodox Christian that a few other historians have claimed to see. That he was not a deist is fairly clear, even quite clear. That he was a Christian is a more shadowy affirmation.

That it was not to the God of deism that President Washington was asking the nation to pray becomes even clearer when one notices *what* Washington in these prayers expected God *to do*, and what specific requests Washington recommended that his fellow citizens address to God.

It is possible, of course, that Washington was a hypocrite, that he did not believe these fantasies himself but commended them to the public only because he was a politician and believed that this was what the public wanted. In order words, he was cynical.

The truth is, however, that such public proclamations of Washington form a seamless garment with his private letters, journals, and reflections. This is the way the private man also thought and felt and acted. More than once he spent an entire day in prayer and fasting. It seems to use that this public proclamation reveals the private Washington quite simply and directly, without affectation or artifice. This is the way he was.

If such public prayers are as close as Washington was willing to come to confessing his faith in Christianity – and he did not really go much further in his private writings – then overpowering evidence for his commitment to a full-dress Christianity is not to be found in the printed record. That he was a very good man in his moral life, stayed well within the bounds of Christian moral imperatives, and fulfilled a very high measure of nearly all Christian virtues is testified to by many witnesses. From the way he lived, his stepgranddaughter and many others close to him thought it impossible to conclude that he was anything but a devoted Christian.

Still, the stated beliefs Washington lived by fell rather short of the full Christian creed. To confess the latter would have required very little of him. Yet he evaded the many invitations offered him in public and in private to do so.

To this point, then, there remains much that is not yet clear in our mind of Washington's God that we must yet inquire into.

Perhaps it suffices at this point to conclude that what we have learned from his public prayers is that his concept of God was far more biblical than deist. Yet it seems more Hebrew than Christian. His official words seem closer to the One God of the Hebrew Prophets and the psalmist than to the Father, Son, and Paraclete of, say, the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. John.

Perhaps in practice many busy and practical Christian men and women have a similarly compact view of God, even if in church they do "confess" the Creed. Not much accustomed to heavy speculation or precise theological thought, they may not have given much effort to inquiring into how they actually explain what they mean by "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" or what practical difference belief in the Trinity makes to their lives. For all practical purposes, they, too, are biblical in their faith, at times in the mode (when they think about it all) of vaguely imagining a singular Creator, Providence, Judge, Governor – more-or-less like the Declaration of Independence. (Hence, author John Derbyshire's quip that the lazy Christian mind is reflexively "deist.") Possibly, at other times when they pray, such practical Christians may imagine the humble, pacific Divine Author of their religion, distinguished by his charity, as Washington did in his Circular to the States. Busy, practical Christians may do both of these things, without trying to examine them together, or to distinguish them, or to indulge in any theological speculation at all. Americans, de Tocqueville noted, although far more religious than Europeans, did not spend excessive time on matters of doctrine. George Washington certainly did not.