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Taking Oaths and Giving Thanks: Ritual and Religion In Revolutionary America

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Taking Oaths and Giving Thanks: Ritual and Religion in Revolutionary America

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the early modern ritual traditions of oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days in Revolutionary America and argues that American politicians and citizens negotiated the meanings of these rituals for American citizenship throughout the Revolutionary era. Oaths of office and allegiance, thanksgivings and fast days were tools for creating a united nation, but they also posed significant challenges because of the religious and political associations inherent in such rituals. These rituals came out of early modern Europe's religious and political culture which was useful for establishing America as a legitimate European nation. As colonials on the edge of the European world, grounding the nation in European tradition was an important step in presenting themselves as a nation on equal footing with Britain, France, and Spain. These same rituals, however, presented problems for unifying a society with as much religious and political variety as appeared in the American colonies.

Thus, for the thirty years between the first Continental Congress in 1774 and the third peaceful exchange of presidential power in 1801, Americans negotiated what constraints the state and federal governments could place on American citizens' religious and political beliefs while simultaneously searching for rituals which would draw the nation together in religious worship and public duty. This negotiation was often not the product of debates over political philosophy, but was enacted by groups and individuals petitioning for more religious freedom or who were viewed as loyal citizens with

religious scruples. Early modern nation states typically established a particular version of Christianity while allowing varying levels of dissent from this norm and while some Americans advocated for this type of established religion in America the reality was that such uniformity of behavior was unlikely to be tolerated in the new nation. Instead, politicians and citizens alike searched for a compromise between an established denomination and total religious freedom which many feared would lead to widespread immorality and poor civic virtue.

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Introduction

In the early months of 1788, as state after state ratified the new Constitution, anti-federalists across the nation argued against the powers of this governing document. They were concerned about the kind of government the Constitution put in place, the amount of power the federal government would have, and how this new form of government would break with European and American culture. In particular, many anti-federalists were concerned about the lack of religion in the federal government. These men railed against the lack of religious tests, an established church, and other required checks on public morality and saw the Constitution not as an example of religious freedom, but as an alarming departure from traditional mores. One such citizen, who styled himself a “David,” wrote to the *Massachusetts Gazette* because he was concerned that the new federal government lacked respect for religion. Every civil government, he observed, had set certain laws respecting public religious piety and “Every nation, I believe, has committed the care of religion to the government.” Europe had allowed government too much religious power, but some “limited” power was altogether proper. “Our annual fasts and thanksgivings,” he argued, “are not only uniform proofs of the exercise of such a power; but are instances of the propriety of our conduct in making frequent and publick

acknowledgements of our dependence upon the Deity.”¹ No one, he argued, questioned the propriety of the government calling for such holidays; all upstanding citizens thought that thanksgivings and fast days were of importance for God’s continued blessings upon America. And, the governments in most states, who loved the liberty of conscience granted to them, “that very love of liberty has induced them to adopt a religious test, which requires all publick officers to be of some Christian protestant persuasion, and to abjure all foreign authority. Thus, religion secures our independence as a nation, and attaches the citizens to our own government.”² David argued that every colonial government, and indeed state government, required religious belief for government officials; they legislated it in the form of thanksgivings and fast days, and set religion as a bar to political activism in the form of an oath. The religiosity of these rituals could not be questioned, David asserted, nor their constant presence in the early modern world. Without oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days, David questioned, what would bind men to both government and God.

Over two-hundred years later, President Barack Obama reiterated David’s point in his second inaugural address. After swearing his oath of office on Martin Luther King Jr.’s Bible and including the phrase “So help me, God,” which is not a requirement of the oath, Obama told citizens of all religious beliefs and backgrounds “that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth.” Echoing the thanksgiving and fast day proclamations of the revolutionary period, the president asserted that God and American citizens worked together to create this nation, positing

¹ “Miscellany,” *Massachusetts Gazette*, March 7, 1788.

² *Ibid.*

that God’s providence allowed for Americans to free themselves from the tyranny of monarchical rule. Later in the speech, the president noted that “My fellow Americans, the oath I have sworn before you today, like the one recited by others who serve in this Capitol, was an oath to God and country...”³ In a nation ordained by God to be a republic of, by, and for, the people, an oath was and is a promise to God and to fellow citizens. As the eighteenth-century editorialist argued, religion binds the public servant to the nation.

When the same president stood to recite his first oath of office in 2009, it was a symbolic and important event, if a routine one.⁴ Forty-four different men had taken this oath of office; some kneeling, some standing, and some on airplanes. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the oath is that Americans today see nothing extraordinary in the fact that the vast majority of presidents have chosen to add that extra phrase to the end of their oaths. There is no requirement that the president acknowledge the Christian God just as there is no requirement that officials use the Bible to swear upon. And never in America’s history has such an action been required of the president. Instead, the cultural norms of the revolutionary generation have become the foundational basis for our expectations of the inaugural ceremony.

“So help me, God” is merely one instance of the American governments’ continued relationship with religious tradition. Only a few short months before President Obama’s inauguration, the nation had celebrated its annual Thanksgiving Day, a holiday

³ “Obama’s Second Inaugural Speech,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2013.

⁴ Roberts moved the word “faithfully” to the end of the sentence instead of reciting “that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States” which caused some difficulty for the president. The men repeated the oath the next day so that no one could claim the president had not been appropriately sworn in.

that comes out of the early modern world. In the summer of 2011, former governor of Texas and soon-to-be Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry hosted a day of fasting and prayer to prevent what he saw as the decline of American public piety and morality. In 2010 and 2011 several groups protested the National Day of Prayer, in which members of Congress and the President have often participated and which has been celebrated for the past fifty years. On a more local, but no less political scale, the right of Muslims to sound the call for prayer from their mosques has been contested in several American cities while Christian churches continue to ring their bells.⁵

These events, both the mundane and the controversial, reflect America's long and conflicted past with religio-political rituals such as oaths, thanksgiving celebrations, and government-sanctioned prayer. For the past two-hundred years, Americans have alternately embraced and rejected these rituals precisely because of their religious nature. Yet, historians and American society generally have often failed to understand the role these rituals played in the formation of an American civic identity and how much they had changed from their early modern European counterparts. While Americans today are apt to think of oaths of office or thanksgiving as rituals whose actions and wordings are unchanging, in the eighteenth century these events changed dramatically in form and substance.

These rituals are in many ways the hallmark of early modern religio-political cooperation during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries and products of this period's emphasis on the religious faith of citizens and subjects. Newly-minted

⁵ "Evangelicals Gather for Gov. Perry's Day of Prayer," *The Washington Post*, August 6th 2011. "Muslims' requests to use loudspeakers for call to prayer divides Detroit community," *Associated Press Archives*, Wednesday April 14th, 2004.

Americans had experienced all three of these events as British subjects and they were so engrained in colonial culture that American citizens adopted, adapted and promoted them as proper practices for a good, virtuous citizenry. This dissertation investigates these religious rituals used by the American government and its citizens from their early modern origins through the end of the eighteenth century in order to understand how America created a religious national identity and established new political rituals. Oaths of office and allegiance, thanksgivings, and fast days were tools for creating a united nation, but they also posed significant challenges because of the religious and political associations inherent in such rituals. As colonials on the edge of the European world, grounding the nation in European tradition was an important step in presenting themselves as a nation on equal footing with Britain, France, and Spain. These same rituals, however, presented problems for unifying a society with as much religious and political variety as appeared in the American colonies.

Thus, for the thirty years between the first Continental Congress in 1774 and the third peaceful exchange of presidential power in 1801, Americans negotiated what constraints the state and federal governments could place on American citizens' religious and political beliefs while simultaneously searching for rituals which would draw the nation together in religious worship and public duty. This negotiation was often not the product of debates over political philosophy, but was enacted by groups and individuals petitioning for more religious freedom or who were viewed as loyal citizens with religious scruples. Early modern nation states typically established a particular version of Christianity while allowing varying levels of dissent from this norm and while some Americans advocated for this type of established religion in America the reality was that

such uniformity of behavior was unlikely to be tolerated in the new nation. Instead, politicians and citizens alike searched for a compromise between an established denomination and total religious freedom which many feared would lead to widespread immorality and poor civic virtue.

Because most people associated religious piety with virtue and believed that virtue was the underpinning of a democracy, individual religious freedom was not a foregone conclusion in the 1770s. Most Americans assumed that a range of Christian beliefs would be tolerated, but where the limits of that toleration would stand was open for debate. For example, while most states allowed religiously scrupulous citizens to affirm an oath rather than swear to it by the 1780s, many Americans worried that allowing anyone to affirm an oath would jeopardize the integrity of the government. These concerns went hand in hand with discussions over who qualified as a good American citizen. If the restrictions on political participation were removed for those with such scruples, Americans wondered what would happen when atheists, Jews, or Muslims presented themselves to vote, govern, and represent the nation. Similar discussions appeared when men refused to participate in national days of thanksgiving or questioned the legality of such events. Public piety during these celebrations was equated with good citizenship and so the theological and political implications of thanksgiving and fasting needed to be acceptable to the general populace.

1789 was an important moment in the transformation of these rituals from early modern European to distinctly American religio-political rituals. Before 1789, states struggled to accommodate their diverse citizenry within early modern notions of national religious unity. After 1789, with the federal government strengthened and solidified,

concerns about religious heterogeneity gradually transmuted into fears about atheism, deism, and the politicization of religious belief. The ratification of the Constitution ensured that the nation would not have an established Christian religion, but religious rituals continued which indicated that America would be a Protestant nation deeply committed to notions of God's providence and special plan for the country. The general consensus on how Christian America should be, however, also aided in religious rituals becoming political pawns because oaths, church attendance and thanksgiving proclamations were often considered political pandering on the part of politicians. Controversies over these rituals in the late 1790s and early nineteenth century became less about American identity and religious freedom and more about the rising power of political parties and religious denominations.

When scholars talk about religious ritual in American politics, we immediately think about Robert Bellah's conception of civil religion, a term much applauded and derided in the forty years since Bellah first suggested that the American government was supported by a nationalizing religion which appropriated Christian rites and concepts but was not "true" Christianity.⁶ American currency, national holidays such as Thanksgiving Day, the United States' motto, and the traditional "So help me, God" phrase have been

⁶ Civil religion is a term coined by Rousseau in his work on the social contract, although not used by Americans in the eighteenth century. Bellah's reconceptualization of the term sparked a flurry of case studies, heated discussion, and examination of modern America for aspects of the phenomenon. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil religion in America." *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 40-55. Important critiques of Bellah include, James A. Mathieson, "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?" *Sociology of Religion* 50, no. 2 (June 20, 1989): 129-146; Martin E. Marty, "Two kinds of civil religion." *American Civil Religion* (1974): 139-57. Despite all of this work, little has been done to examine the development and permutations of these rituals through time and what work has been done focuses almost solely on America after the creation of the Constitution.

held up as examples of American civil religion.⁷ And while civil religion is a useful category for understanding why Americans accept religion in the political realm, the term does little to explain how Americans in the founding generation managed to create civil rituals and symbols out of experiences that had both religious and political meaning in the early modern world. Ritual theories and concepts like civil religion struggle to capture the evolution of ritual-like activities over time and, as the debates between medievalists Phillippe Buc and Geoffrey Koziol demonstrate, these theories often portray rituals as unchanging events.⁸ This dissertation situates three American religio-political rituals in their context before, during, and after the creation of the American republic in order to demonstrate how they were adapted for a pluralist democracy, their importance in uniting people from a variety of religious denominations and ethnic groupings, and what the relationship was between religious belief and good citizenship. As rituals, thanksgivings, fast days, and oaths presented examples of good behavior while simultaneously being reinvented to accommodate religious heterodoxy and political need. The Constitution ensured that America would have no established church at the federal level, and in fact encouraged a separation between religious belief and political activity, but this freedom was not a foregone conclusion at the beginning of the revolutionary period, nor a universally applauded decision in the 1790s.

⁷ Robert N. Bellah “Religion and the Legitimization of America” in Steven M. Tipton ed., *The Robert Bellah Reader*, (Duke University Press Books, 2006,) pg. 246-264.

⁸ Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*, (Princeton University Press, 2001.) Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France*, (Cornell University Press, 1992.)

Scholars have long examined the Revolutionary Generation's attitude towards church and state in hopes of identifying the original intent of the religious freedom clause of the Constitution. The literature on this subject is dense and often contradictory; well-regarded scholars argue that the intent of the clause was to strictly separate religious action from the public sphere while others assert that the framers intended only to prevent the establishment of a particular denomination. These debates have deeply enriched our understanding of individual framer's ideological outlooks as well as the state of constitutional philosophy in the late eighteenth century, but they have done little to demonstrate how Americans came to hold these beliefs or what the true status of religious freedom was at the time of ratification.

Often, historians have entered into debates about whether or not America was founded as a "Christian nation" suggesting that the founding generation took as its task to either confirm or reject millennia of Western thought on the role of Christianity. This debate centers on church attendance and membership, founding fathers' thoughts on the role of religion and the state (especially Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Washington), and categorizing whether members of the founding generation were deists, rational humanists, secularists, old lights, new lights, or traditional Christians. Sometimes these arguments use the state constitutions created prior to the Constitution as further proof that America either was or was not Christian. What scholars engaged in this debate most often do not do, however, is accept that the founding generation was neither so forward thinking as to conceive of a non-Christian Western nation nor so short-sighted as to recreate Great Britain in the new world. Accomodationist scholars have offered up a "middle way" which posits that some revolutionaries wanted a secular state while others

wanted an established church, but this is more an attempt to justify a moderate attitude towards church-state interactions today than a viable argument for how America ended up with the religious liberty we currently celebrate.

One strategy for understanding the religious ideologies of the founding generation has been to mine the writings of this group of men for all references to religion, morality, and conscience. The product of such research has been works such as Daniel Dreisbach's *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life* which posits that the majority of the founding generation was deeply religious and wanted to establish a Christian America. These men, however, have been passed over by later generations for men whose worldview is more similar to modern secular thought.⁹ Slightly more of a middle ground on this debate has been Thomas Kidd whose 2010 work, *God of Liberty; A Religious History of the American Revolution*, does not denigrate the efforts of Jefferson, Madison, and others in order to raise the prestige of other founders. Kidd establishes the centrality of religion to the ideology and day-to-day workings of the Revolutionary government and army. Kidd, however, does not demonstrate that either religion or religious ideology changed much as Americans experience war and the realities of a new governmental structure.¹⁰

⁹ Daniel Dreisbach, *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life*, (Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009.)

¹⁰ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010.) Other works in this vein include; James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, (Washington, D.C: Library of Congress, 1998), Edwin Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826*, (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), Rod Gragg, *Forged in Faith: How Faith Shaped the Birth of the Nation, 1607-1776*, (New York: Howard Books, 2010), Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*, (New York: Random House, 2008.) At least one work

Works that follow the religious beliefs of individual founders have also influenced this dissertation as they illuminate the complex personal beliefs of men who had encountered the trials of national governance and the changes American independence inspired within them. Bruce Braden's recent work on the writings of Adams and Jefferson on religion and morality is a particularly striking example of this genre. Braden's collection focuses on Adams and Jefferson in their later years after both have assumed the presidency. The debates and conversations between these two men who have legislated liberty, presided over a burgeoning democracy and faced scandal and ridicule, reflected the centrality of religion, or at least morality, to their conception of civil government.¹¹ Many of these discussions build off the correspondence and dialogue between Adams and Benjamin Rush which have been compiled in *The Spur of Fame* by John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair. This book also illuminates the change over time between these influential founders' early ideas about liberty and religion and later conclusions.¹²

Scholars have also gravitated towards the study of the first amendment as a way to uncover the original intentions of the founding generation. This field of scholarship is driven by legal and constitutional scholars and most often begins with the First

approaches the role of religion in America from the opposite historiographical camp. See, Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003.)

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Bruce Braden, "*Ye Will Say I am No Christian*": *The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values*, (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006.)

¹² John Adams, Benjamin Rush, John A Schutz, and Douglass Adair, *The Spur of Fame; Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813*, (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1966.)

Amendment rather than incorporating that law into a discussion of religious toleration throughout the revolutionary era.¹³ There are, however, several important works which attempt to synthesize the legal role of religion during the colonial period. In particular, William Roscoe Estep has worked to illustrate how the first amendment was the consequence of American colonial history; a goal which this dissertation also holds.¹⁴ Often, scholars who place the first amendment in its historical context do so by investigating ideas about church establishment in the wake of independence. In one such article, Colin Kidd looks at the failing establishment at the state level as one reason that the Constitutional convention outlaws religious establishment.¹⁵ Perhaps one of the most useful works for this dissertation in terms of content and approach has been Derek Davis's research on religion and the Continental Congress. His attention to the way political events shaped ideology has been crucial in understanding the actions of the revolutionary generation.¹⁶

¹³ Alan Brownstein, *The First Amendment: the Establishment of Religion Clause: Its Constitutional History and the Contemporary Debate*, (Amherst N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2008), Arlin M. Adams, *A Nation Dedicated to Religious Liberty: The Constitutional Heritage of the Religion Clauses*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), Gerard V. Bradley, "No Religious Test Clause and the Constitution of Religious Liberty: A Machine That Has Gone of Itself," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 37 (1986-1987): 674, Christopher L. Eisgruber, *Religious Freedom and the Constitution*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.)

¹⁴ James H. Hutson, *Church and State in America: The First Two Centuries*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), William Roscoe Estep, *Revolution Within the Revolution: The First Amendment In Historical Context, 1612-1789*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1990.) This book follows in the footsteps of an article by Edwin Gaustad, "A Disestablished Society: Origins of the First Amendment." *Journal of Church and State* 11, no. 3 (October 2, 1969): 409–425.

¹⁵ Colin Kidd, "Civil Theology and Church Establishments in Revolutionary America." *The Historical Journal* 42, no. 4 (December 1999): 1007–1026.

Another influential work for this dissertation is William Miller's 2008 book, *Faith, Reason, and Consent; Legislating Morality in early American States*, which posits that religious freedom in early America required the legislation of basic moral tenets. He states that, "many, if not all, of the state founders understood divine law to have some degree of relevance and authority. The right or duty to worship is asserted in every state constitution. The fact that the right to worship is a consistent theme in the state constitutional tradition demonstrates a conviction that God, specifically citizens' individual relationships to God, is relevant to these new states."¹⁷ Miller's assertion that Americans generally wanted to police individual relationships with God is amply demonstrated in the various discussions about thanksgivings, oaths, and fast days because all three of these events were public expressions of private religious belief and as such were used to calibrate American Christianity.

According to historian James T. Hutson's research on the relationship between church and state in America, through thanksgivings and fast days, "Congress adopted and preached to the American people the political theology of the national covenant" which emphasized America's special role in the world and God's special purpose for the nation.¹⁸ Intimately linked to covenant theology was the role of Providence in American life. Nicholas Guyatt's work on Providence and the making of America reveals the depth

¹⁶ Derek Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.)

¹⁷ William Miller, *Faith, Reason, and Consent: Legislating Morality in Early American States*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2008.)

¹⁸ James H Hutson, *Church and State in America: The First Two Centuries*, Cambridge essential histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pg 99.

to which the belief in providence shaped American character and pushed the American colonists towards independence and eventually towards the Constitution.¹⁹ God's active role in America, along with his promise to make the nation especially blessed, resonated with early national citizens and supported their attempts to keep religion solidly united with the government. While not products of providential theology, oaths also reinforced the idea of God's providence because these ritual events presupposed that God would act in this world and the next. In this way, oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days all underscored God's active presence on earth.

Thanksgivings and fast days have generally been researched in connection with Puritan New England, especially on the Plymouth thanksgiving in 1621 or on the establishment of the holiday in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fast days are generally treated either as the spring-time companion of the more important thanksgiving celebration or as a religious event designed to allow the clergy to delineate the sins of their congregations. The general trend in this scholarship is to identify thanksgivings and fast days as Puritan New England traditions which slowly spread throughout the nation in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This school of thought originated in the nineteenth century as the history of fasting and thanksgiving was recorded by scholars in New England. In his 1895 work on regional thanksgivings and fast days, William Deloss Love stated that "For many years the streams of emigration flowed from New England, as rivers from a mountain spring, and the children carried the knowledge of the autumn

¹⁹ Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

festival wherever they went....”²⁰ In other words, thanksgiving was a gift that New England gave to the nation. James W. Baker’s recent work on the American thanksgiving tradition continues the argument concerning the New England origins of the holiday and emphasizes the spread of New English culture throughout America as a leading reason that the holiday became national.²¹ These scholars have assumed that thanksgiving was ultimately an American tradition and treated its genesis as nineteenth-century New English nostalgia.²²

²⁰ William DeLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1895), 358.

²¹ James W. Baker, *Thanksgiving: the Biography of an American Holiday* (Hanover: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009.)

²² Carolyn Travers recognizes the American thanksgiving tradition as the conglomeration of three separate traditions; New English harvest festivals, religious thanksgiving celebrations, and Forefather’s Day which celebrated the Pilgrim’s landing in Plymouth. Carolyn Travers, “The American Thanksgiving: The Evolution of a Tradition,” *New England Journal of History* 48, no. 1 (1991): 30-35. In her article on thanksgiving and collective memory, Amy Adamczyk correctly asserts that thanksgiving in the eighteenth century was not a remembrance of the 1621 thanksgiving, but also asserts that thanksgiving in this era was not associated with familial feasts nor was it a “national holiday.” Her assertions are understandable when the major source of research is the thanksgiving proclamations of the era. However, the newspapers and personal papers of the early republic give a different view of the holiday. Amy Adamczyk, “On Thanksgiving and Collective Memory; Constructing the American Tradition,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 15, no. 3 (2002): 343-365. See especially pgs. 349-351. For an ethnographic view of the modern thanksgiving tradition, see Kathleen Curtin, *Giving thanks : Thanksgiving recipes and history, from Pilgrims to pumpkin pie*, 1st ed. (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2005); Janet Siskind, “The Invention of Thanksgiving: A Ritual of American Nationality,” *Critique of Anthropology* 12, no. 2 (1999): 167-191. One of the best works on the development of thanksgiving and American national identity is found in Matthew Dennis’ *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.) Chapter 2: “Haven in a Heartless Calendar: American Thanksgiving, 1621-2000” argues that the modern thanksgiving holiday is a nineteenth-century creation and of New England origin. His work demonstrates the importance of holidays such as thanksgiving to American nationalism and identity as well as the way that ritual both reinforces and creates tradition.

Fast days have been studied in an entirely different light. Unlike thanksgiving which comes with a set of cultural expectations based on the celebration today, fast days are not generally practiced today and are typically viewed less as patriotic events than as religious experiences. Scholarly research on fasting in America has been very thin. Some scholars have looked at fast days and fast day sermons within New England as they pertain to Puritanism.²³ Other scholars have focused on local fast days in the nineteenth century as they relate to evangelical revivals and political action. Adam Jortner has written an excellent piece on the fast days associated with the cholera epidemic of 1832 in which he argues that political timing shaped the fast day controversies during the epidemic. Jortner considers fast days to be aspects of civil religion, but he also recognizes that such holidays were actively contested throughout the antebellum period.²⁴

Much of the best scholarship on fasting has been done by scholars of the body and foodways. The seminal work in the field is Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* which established food and the rejection of food as a legitimate area of historical study. Bynum argues that medieval women used foodways and symbolism to shape their role in the religious community especially through fasting. Bynum's work is one of many recent works which focuses on the body and embodiment. In these works, eating, sexuality, disability,

²³ Sacvon Bercovitch used fast day sermons in his influential *American Jeremiad* and other scholars have followed suit to use fast day sermons as sources of political ideology and public opinion on the Revolution. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.)

²⁴ Adam Jortner, "Cholera, Christ, and Jackson: The Epidemic of 1832 and the Origins of Christian Politics in Antebellum America." *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 2 (2007): 233–264.

and other bodily functions are the focus of scholarly concern. This present work does not focus on the body, in part because the body was rarely the center of attention during thanksgiving and fast days for eighteenth-century Americans. In the early American context, fast days more often were celebrated by waiting to dine until after sunset or to eat only bread for the day than an actual abstention from food and the practice of fasting was rarely mentioned. Actual fasting took a back seat to private prayer and church attendance on American fast days.

Along with the study of thanksgiving as an American tradition, scholars of the early national period have often used thanksgiving proclamations to demonstrate the presence of religion in the federal government; however, they have rarely focused on the celebration itself in the way that the Fourth of July, Christmas, and other patriotic or religious holidays have been studied. Scholars of the period have, however, demonstrated that Americans during the period often turned to holidays and other public rituals such as parades for creating a sense of American nationalism. Matthew Dennis has argued that the Fourth of July had more cultural capital in the early republic than thanksgiving; an assertion which I challenge although I agree with his claim that the modern thanksgiving tradition is a product of nineteenth-century nostalgia rather than a Puritan ritual. In many cases, these studies begin with the establishment of the Constitution without regard to the considerable amount of effort that was spent on creating an American identity before the federal government was created. Especially in regards to thanksgiving, which as an early modern tradition was already imbued with religious and political meanings, politicians

and citizens alike turned to ritual events as soon as independence became probable in an effort to create unity amongst the varied American colonies.²⁵

Ritual is a slippery and often misused lens of analysis. Sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians have all proposed definitions of ritual ranging in scope from the minute (only those events which fit into a particular set of formalized actions) to the capacious. Moreover, scholars have disagreed on whether rituals are set events which always happen in a certain order, or whether they are constantly evolving symbolic events. Some have limited the world of ritual to the religious sphere, denoting everything else as “ritual-like.”²⁶

Edward Muir has argued that the early modern era has been the most crucial period for ritual theory formation throughout his career.²⁷ This period has been especially important because it is the moment when society became self-aware of its rituals. They began to observe, quantify, and classify ritual and have created many of the categories of ritual we use today. Robert Grimes has posited that rituals are actually extraordinarily varied and pervasive. He sees six categories of ritual ranging from

²⁵ The scholarship on early national public performance and revelry is extensive. Some of the most important work for demonstrating the creation of an American identity includes: Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

²⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.)

²⁷ See for example, Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Second Edition, (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.) This position is also held by ritual theorists such as David Kertzer.

decorous manners such as hand shaking to political events such as inaugurations to the Catholic Mass and even celebratory rites such as Santa Fe's annual Fiesta. In response to scholars who hold narrow views of ritual events, he argues that "The danger of defining ritual in terms of more mature or sacred examples such as the Passover celebration or the Mass is that we miss the continuity between habits, symptoms, or mannerisms, on the one hand, and civil ceremonies, formal liturgies, or ludic celebrations, on the other."²⁸ These acts, he says, are all rituals which become both symbolic reflections of a culture and active agents in culture change.

This more capacious definition of ritual may encompass acts which are not interpreted by actors as symbolic or expressive events, but the definition's emphasis on ritual as a dynamic force in social structures is crucial to understanding the role of oaths, thanksgivings and fast days in the eighteenth century. All three of these events were viewed by revolutionary Americans as ritual; they considered them to be traditional events whose form and function held special meaning and conveyed cultural norms. Thus, unlike the debates of medieval historians over coronations or ritual theorists over hand-shaking, I am dealing with self-identified rituals which were treated as special moments outside regular time. In addition, these rituals were not solely religious or political rituals. They had developed throughout the early modern period into ritual events which meshed religious piety and political duty. I use the term religio-political to designate the intertwined nature of these rituals.

In America's nascent period, religion and government were not fully separated as they have become in the modern world. Most governments still dictated the religious

²⁸ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982,) 56.

expressions of their citizens and required certain beliefs for political participation. Moreover, the idea of citizenship still retained a sense of religious obligation. So, it is not surprising that political rituals in early America still held deep religious meanings or that religious rituals were often called in response to political events. In particular, new Americans clung to ceremonial rituals, to borrow Ronald Grimes' phrase.²⁹ These rituals often symbolize power and large-scale political involvement. Ceremonial rituals in the new nation included thanksgiving and fast days which demonstrated the power of the new federal government to draw its citizens together in religious piety; oaths of office and allegiance which actively bound citizens to America by invoking God's power of judgment; Congressional prayer and communal worship, church bell ringings, and political processions for religious events which all demonstrated the power of a political entity to create patriotism and inspire national virtue.

Chapter breakdown

This dissertation begins with a chapter on the early modern ritual tradition inherited by colonial Americans. Oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days were in many ways products of the state formation and religious diversity of the early modern period. The development of these ritual events both aided in creating national identities and in determining who could and could not be considered a citizen. In addition to their nationalizing functions, academics, politicians, and clergy also developed sophisticated philosophies and theologies concerning these rituals which reflected early modern thought on the relationship between church and state as well as between God and the

²⁹ Ibid, 46. Grimes argues that "Power is a central consideration in ceremony" and that these types of rituals are often symbols of a political entities power. Power was not the only reason early America prized these rituals, but is an important aspect of creating a national identity.

secular authorities. Through a careful analysis of the development of these rituals throughout Europe, but especially in England, this chapter traces the ritual world inherited by colonial Americans.

The next two chapters investigate the adoption and adaptation of oaths in the early American republic. Chapter two looks at oaths of allegiance and office during the American Revolution which established citizenship as both a political and religious position. On a theoretical level, oaths of allegiance to the United States presented problems for scrupulous non-British Protestants who had immigrated to the American colonies in search of religious freedom and economic gain because these colonists had taken oaths of allegiance to the King as part of their naturalization process. American oaths of allegiance posed issues for Anglican clergymen as well because their oaths of ordination also contained obligations to the king. While many clergymen and immigrant colonists did not scruple to take new oaths of allegiance, others did and their petitions and concerns prompted serious discussions on the religious obligations of oaths, the religious beliefs of the new nation, and how exactly an independent America could satisfy such religious beliefs without sacrificing the loyalty of its citizens. This complex relationship was made increasingly difficult as each state created its own constitution which often included religious tests within oaths of office. Beginning in 1776, each state worked to develop a new system of governance and new definitions of citizenship. Key to this goal was establishing requirements for officeholders through oaths of office which could restrict men of various denominations or religious beliefs from political engagement. As state politicians sought to restrict atheists, Jews, and Muslims from the act of governing, they also attempted to include as many upstanding Christian citizens as possible. This

combination resulted in loosened religious tests, but an increasing emphasis on the religiosity of oaths in general.

Chapter three turns to the creation of the federal Constitution with its “no religious test” clause. From 1776 to 1789 when George Washington took the federal oath of office in front of thousands, states and individuals negotiated the limits of religious freedom through debates, petitions, and public commentary on such oaths. In particular, Americans debated what it meant to be an American citizen and whether freedom of conscience was completely compatible with citizenship. Members of the Constitutional convention brought with them opinions on what the religious beliefs of officeholders should be from the outcomes of state constitutions and religious objections to test oaths. Article VI Section 2 of the Constitution was not a foregone conclusion at the outset of the convention nor was it unanimously approved of by American citizens. In fact, as President Washington took the oath of office in 1789, although he took no test oath, he and those watching demonstrated that an oath continued to hold religious power and would continue to do so throughout the 1790s.

Chapters four and five turn to the communal public rituals of thanksgiving and fasting in order to examine how religious citizenship developed out of doors. Chapter three explores the development of a particularly American thanksgiving and fasting tradition from the early 1770s through President Washington’s 1789 thanksgiving celebration. Although both thanksgivings and fast days were early modern European traditions, Americans appropriated both holidays as unique American events which asserted both the legitimacy of the nation and the religious and civic virtue of its people. Those who objected to thanksgiving and fast days either for religious or political reasons

often found their loyalty questioned. Thanksgiving and fasting became religious litmus tests for political loyalty and in many ways defined what it meant to be an American citizen.

Chapter five continues the story of thanksgiving and fast days past Washington's 1789 celebration into the politically charged 1790s and early nineteenth century. Once the nation had been established and the Constitution ratified, political partisanship, regional rivalry and the rise of denominational power led to the destruction of thanksgiving and fasting celebrations. The reason for this demise as well as its implications are the foci of this chapter. As private citizens and organizations coopted the thanksgiving and fasting experiences for their own use, the holidays lost some of the national prominence and *cultural capital* that they had held during the revolution. Various denominations and political parties continued to use such days to bolster their particular view of national identity and public virtue, but instead of creating unity these thanksgivings and fast days, especially president Adams' 1797 and 1798 "fastgiving" celebrations, incited national dissent and political factions.

The conclusion of this dissertation looks back at the early republican period from the vantage point of the War of 1812. At a moment when oaths and thanksgivings could once again be politically salient topics, the religious and political landscape of America looked strikingly different from 1776. Thanksgivings were mocked for their political natures, oaths were of no consequence, but other events had taken their place. As American identity became a more established idea, and as religious denominations proliferated, the need to tie religious practice with American citizenship decreased. With

a stable government, Americans no longer needed to know that they joined together in religious thanksgiving or that they shared a set of political and religious oath obligations.

This dissertation balances two timelines. First, the constant process of change and adaptation of these rituals throughout the early modern period from religio-political tools to bind subjects to their sovereign and his government to religio-political statements of American identity which demonstrated the actions of good citizens. Secondly, this dissertation focuses on the establishment of American ideology in the 1770s and 1780s and the challenges placed on these ideologies which led to the development of new and explicitly American rituals during Washington's presidency. The year 1789 serves as both an endpoint of revolutionary exploration of religious liberty and the beginning of a new relationship between government and religious ritual. After 1789, politicians on the state and the federal level had a common set of ritual experiences to draw upon, and as Simon Newman has argued, "by the end of the century the ritual form and symbolic content of popular political culture had developed into a common, national language of politics and political activity. Consequently a Virginian could read of July Fourth celebrations in Boston and understand the form, content, and meaning of what was going on, including the political agenda and ideology of the ordinary Americans who were supporting the event as participants and spectators."³⁰

The time period of this dissertation stretches from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in early modern Europe to the War of 1812. The majority of the dissertation is spent on analyzing America during the last three decades of the eighteenth century.

³⁰Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic*, (Philadelphia, Pa: Penn, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 187-188.

Americans saw themselves as the inheritors of the early modern world and saw the nation as a continuation of European political thought. It is impossible to separate eighteenth-century American values and belief systems from the early modern world and doing so creates a sense of American exceptionalism which distorts the actions of the revolutionary generation. Because this dissertation is particularly concerned with how Americans negotiated already existing rituals, it is necessary to look backwards from the late eighteenth century at the constant evolution of these ritual events. Increasingly after the enactment of the Constitution in 1789, Americans saw themselves as separate from the European world and so this dissertation stops after the War of 1812 unquestionably establishes America's independence.

I have specifically chosen oaths, thanksgivings and fast days for this study because the negotiations over their forms, functions, and meanings were particularly public. All three of these rituals were discussed in legislative sessions, by executive proclamations or speeches, in the newspapers, as well as in sermons, personal letters, and published pamphlets. The ubiquity of these ritual experiences and the active debate over the role they would play in the new nation meant that all American citizens were invested in creating rituals that reflected their personal ideals. While other religio-political events were important, especially congressional prayer, bell-ringing, and election-day sermons, none of these were proscribed by the federal government or were intended to reflect the religio-political views of citizens generally.

This dissertation is national in scope. While chapter three focuses on three specific states, the intention is to demonstrate that Americans did create a national identity on some level and so I have integrated material from the Carolinas, Virginia, the

Middle Atlantic and New England. I am especially attempting demonstrate that thanksgiving and fast day celebrations were not solely products of New England nor were oaths only objected to by small Christian sects. Thanksgiving and fasting were early modern traditions, not American Puritan inventions and Americans of many theological backgrounds supported these rituals. Similarly, oaths held religious implications for all religiously-minded individuals and as such, men of all denominations could and did object to them.

The relationship between God, nation, and citizen was constantly evolving and in many cases subject to personal interpretation. Yet, the importance of oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days to national unity and the creation of an American citizenry cannot be understated. In 1778, as American colonists found themselves embroiled in a war with their mother country far more onerous than many had anticipated, one Philadelphia newspaper attempted to call people's attention to the many blessings the nation had experienced throughout the year. "Her independence has been acknowledged," the paper noted, "...her enemies confounded...late servants of the crown...abjure their former sovereign and [devote] themselves with the solemnity of an oath to the liberties and independence of America...Do not all these things call for a day of thanksgiving throughout the continent?"³¹ Solemn oaths, a free and independent nation, and other blessings were a good cause for thanksgivings in America during the American Revolution. These blessings underscored God's active presence in the nation and citizens' recognition of His goodness on earth. Such religio-political rituals were

³¹ "Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Evening Post*, July 18, 1778.

signifiers of American religious piety and were also sources of tension over the limits of American freedom.

1. The Early Modern Traditions of Oaths, Thanksgivings, and Fast Days

“Did I tell you that our Parson moved for a General Fast to be observed on the 27 July throughout the Colony the ministers to be desired to preach sermons suitably to the occasion in this Oliverian step he succeeded.” --Henry Laurens To John Laurens 23 June 1775

In one of many letters sent between Henry Laurens and his son, John, who was studying law in London during the American Revolution, the older Laurens noted that one of the local ministers, presumably the Anglican Robert Smith, had called for a fast day. This event, according to Henry, was “Oliverian”; a reference to the Puritan leader during the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell. Days of fasting and thanksgiving had been common occurrences during that war and the Commonwealth period which followed it because these events merged religious belief and national sentiment. By calling the minister’s resolution “Oliverian,” Laurens associated fast days with the religiously-charged goals of Cromwell’s army, the close relationship between puritan religious beliefs and the Cromwellian Protectorate, and the success of the roundheads against the king of England. American colonials were not ignorant of English history and indeed, as Laurens indicates, adapted this history and tradition for their own use. The early modern tradition of oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days was one reason that American patriots appropriated these rituals as bolsters to their new nation; these events marked America as a continuation of European culture, set identifiable restrictions on

citizens' public behavior, and created moments of national unity that held meaning for people from all European backgrounds.

Much of this ritual tradition was the result of the Reformation and the rise of European nation-states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days had roots much farther back in European history, but all three of these actions took on new meanings as personal identity became connected with both religious belief and political allegiance. Before the Reformation, with notable exceptions, people were assumed to be Catholic Christians. While political allegiances could change, it was a far rarer thing for religious belief to be questioned. With the religious divisions and wars of the early modern period, thanksgiving, communal fasting, and oaths of allegiance, office, and naturalization were constantly negotiated. They took on new meanings as different religions and governments appropriated them and recreated their meaning to reflect the beliefs and goals of new regimes.

As religious affiliation became more diversified after the Reformation, certain ritual events that had been highly systematic during the medieval period such as oaths of allegiance became religiously and politically charged in a new way. In an attempt to keep political units theologically homogenous, civil authorities began to include religious tests to oaths which restricted men with beliefs outside the established state church from political participation. These tests served as a reminder and a warning that religious and political identity went hand in hand in early modern nation states and reinforced the idea that God gave civil leaders their earthly powers among which was designating the religious identity of the state. Thanksgivings and fast days were equally bound up with religio-political identity. Political leaders called for these holidays to demonstrate that

God was actively involved in the good of the state. The list of blessings and sins that accompanied such proclamations encouraged subjects to embrace the vision of the polity civil leaders offered. After a fast day or thanksgiving had been proclaimed, civil authority could further its agenda through the sermons preached on that day which would enumerate and elaborate on the state's blessings, character, and shortcomings. While thanksgivings and fast days presented the possibility of turmoil if ministers spoke against the government or if subjects appropriated the day for their own devices, in general such holidays served to unite church and state, not divide them.³²

While this combination of national pride and religious homogeneity was visible across the European continent, it was especially prominent in England where King Henry VIII's creation of the English Church gave civil and ecclesiastical authorities the same source of power: from the King by God. The British colonies would inherit English traditions in particular and so the developments of oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days in England were especially influential. While oath controversies in the German states and France prompted some emigration to the British American colonies, most American colonists had English custom and tradition deeply engrained in them.³³ This is especially true of oath rituals and national holidays because these events connected the far-flung colonists to their mother-country.

³² For discussions on early modern identity formation and ritual development see Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.); Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: an Interpretation of Early Modern Germany*, (New York: Routledge, 1997.)

³³ For example, German Mennonites in the Palatinate chose to emigrate rather than take religious tests in the mid-eighteenth century. See, Harold Bender, *Mennonite Origins in Europe*, (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee, 1945.)

The English adaptation of old rituals and the creation of new began with Henry VIII as he looked to make the Church profitable for himself in the wake of England's withdrawal from Catholic hegemony. By restricting the largess of the church on the many saints' days and other holidays, Henry created a more streamlined and efficient church structure. Along with paring down the liturgical calendar, Henry intertwined church and state by placing himself at the head of both institutions. To be Henry's vassal was now also to be a member of his church. Englishness and Anglicanism became almost one and the same. In order to create this state church, Henry had to create new oaths which would bind people to church and state. This oath of supremacy set out new religious requirements for political participation in England: specifically that the King, not the pope, was the head of the English Church. This shift in leadership (and theology) was a huge adjustment for England and also led to a difficult existence for those who wished to remain English and loyal to the pope.³⁴

It was Elizabeth's long reign and centralized administration which began to mix religious and patriotic celebrations into a potent new type of event. Rather than allowing local governments and leaders to proclaim and celebrate holidays in their own way, Elizabeth created a national framework for religio-political celebrations. For example, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, she instructed the entire nation to celebrate with a day of thanksgiving for the God's blessing on the nation. Many scholars have identified this as the first English day of thanksgiving and have noted that this newfound national holiday went hand in hand with the establishment of a sense of English identity. In addition to such religiously imbued patriotic events, were celebrations of the Queen's

³⁴ Most famously, Thomas More refused to take the oath of succession and paid for that decision with his life.

birthday, her Coronation Day, Guy Fawkes Day, and other more local events. Many of these events became traditional even after Queen Elizabeth's reign ended. So, for example, by 1748 the monarch's official birthday was celebrated in late May or early June instead of on his actual birthday.

Elizabeth also solidified the oath of supremacy which placed the monarch at the head of the English Church. Although she is often remembered for allowing Catholic traditions to coexist with Protestant ideals during her long reign, she also sought to restrict from political life those who refused to accept her place in church hierarchy or "middle way" theology. The Oath of Supremacy of 1559 specified that civil and ecclesiastical leaders must accept that "the Queen's Highness is the only supreme governor of this realm...as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes, as temporal, and that no foreign prince, person, prelate, state or potentate hath or ought to have any jurisdiction, power, superiority, pre-eminence or authority ecclesiastical or spiritual within this realm..."³⁵ Elizabeth did not place specific theological tests within the text of the oath—she did not require a belief in the trinity, a rejection of transubstantiation, or any other test which would remove Catholics or radical sects from public participation—yet the force of the oath was to remove conscientious Catholics from political action. The oath required oath-takers to swear by the Holy Evangelist to seal the oath with "So help me, God and by the contents of this book."

Civil and ecclesiastical authorities throughout Europe developed sophisticated theories around oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days throughout the early modern period. Oaths in particular were the subject of casuistic philosophies that underscored their

³⁵ Queen Elizabeth I, *Act of Supremacy*, 1559.

complex religio-political office. Theologians, philosophers, and political thinkers sought ways around required oaths and religious tests in order to participate in the political process, or even just to remain residents within their state. At its core, an oath is a promise made in front of man and God. Oaths are speech acts, words that “do things” to use J.L. Austin’s famous phrase.³⁶ In the particular case of oaths, the swearer invited God and man to act as witnesses to his promise. In return, God and man have the right to judge and punish the swearer should he fail to uphold his oath. An oath, then, is also a moment when the earthly world and God’s heavenly kingdom are not separated, but connect and allow God to be present at the earthly exchange of words. As many early modern casuists observed, an oath was of necessity a religious act. Oaths came in several forms; oaths of allegiance, oaths of office such as the coronation oath, oaths of witness testimony, and religious oaths. Often, oaths were taken in combination—oaths of office contained oaths of allegiance and most oaths contained some statement of religious belief to which the swearer had to agree.

The early modern world saw the study of oaths explode, particularly by casuists who sought to understand the ethical dilemmas posed in matters of conscience or religious disagreement.³⁷ Scholars created theoretical frameworks to establish what an

³⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975.)

³⁷ For an in-depth discussion of casuistry and early modern oaths see; Stefania Tutino, *Law and Conscience: Catholicism in Early Modern England, 1570-1625*, (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.); Edward Vallance, *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant: State Oaths, Protestantism, and the Political Nation, 1553-1682*, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2005.); Patrick Fagan, *Divided Loyalties: The Question of the Oath for Irish Catholics in the Eighteenth Century*, (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1997.); Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England: The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,

oath was, how it functioned, how it could be broken, and what made it binding in this world and the next. There were (and are) two basic kinds of oaths, the promissory and assertatory. A promissory oath invoked God to witness a promise such as an assurance of loyalty or promise to uphold an office. An assertatory oath on the other hand, called on God to witness a statement of fact such as witness testimony or religious belief. In either case, God's role as witness was supposed to act as an extra impetus to keep the oath because God would judge oath-breakers harshly in addition to any civil punishment inflicted on earth. Oaths of allegiance have their foundation in the feudal world of medieval Europe where relationships between lord and vassal were cemented with an oath of fealty. These oaths became highly visible affairs with specific forms, wordings, and traditions attached to them. As the feudal system gradually gave way to the more centralized governments of the early modern period, oaths of allegiance also changed; they became more focused on wording and more intent on binding people to an invisible idea of a nation rather than a single individual. Perhaps the most visible oath of the medieval and early modern period was the coronation oath of a monarch. Deeply embedded with both political and religious significance, these oaths demonstrated that a monarch's civil power came from God, that civil and religious power were deeply connected, and that God promised to judge the actions of the monarch at the judgment day.

Other kinds of oaths were central to political participation in the early modern world as well. On the European continent, oaths of allegiance laced with religious restrictions became more and more frequent as Protestantism spread throughout the Holy

2006.); Edmund Leites, *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 1988.)

Roman Empire and elsewhere. These oaths attempted to reunite civic identity with religious belief and extinguish dissenting religious groups. In England, these religious tests became a way of policing the electorate and preventing members of Parliament and government officials from holding unwanted religious beliefs (and the political opinions that often followed them.)

The Reformation had allowed, for the first time in centuries, theological systems outside of Catholicism to be treated as legitimate. One way to curtail heterogeneous religious beliefs within a nation was to tie these oaths of office and allegiance to a particular theology rather than a general belief in God. So, in England this meant restricting office holding to those who would swear they were not Catholic. The English Oath of Allegiance, although it varied slightly in wording throughout the seventeenth century called on subject to swear that “the pope, neither of himself, nor any Authority of the Church or sea [sic] of Rome, or by any other means with any other, hath any Power or Authority to depose the King or to dispose of any of his Majesties Kingdoms or Dominions...”³⁸ In a nod to the Jesuits and other casuists who had found a variety of ways around this oath, the loyalty oath also required swearers to declare, “I do plainly and sincerely acknowledge and swear according to these express words by me spoken and according to the plain and common sense and understanding of the same words, without any equivocation, or mental evasion, or secret reservation whatsoever.”³⁹ While

³⁸ H. Twyford, et. Al, *The Book of Oaths and the Several Forms Thereof, Both Ancient and Modern Faithfully Collected Out of Sundry Authentick Books of Records Not Heretofore Extant, Very Useful for All Persons Whatsoever, Especially those That Undertake Any Office of Magistracy or Publique Employment: Whereunto Is Added a Perfect Table*, (London, 1689),65.

³⁹ Ibid.

this general oath sufficed for much of the sixteenth century, under Elizabeth's reign radical Protestant dissenters also came under scrutiny. Calling themselves scrupulous, these dissenters refused to take oaths of office and allegiance because they believed that the national religion still held too many popish tendencies. These separatists refused to acknowledge the power of the bishopric and chafed at requirements such as taking communion in the Anglican Church before accepting governmental office. Other dissenters really were scrupulous and avoided oaths on theological grounds. These dissenters presented a far trickier political problem because they objected to the religious meanings behind oaths, but might be perfectly willing to live peacefully within the Anglican Church. By the seventeenth century, with Stuart kings on the throne who were at least sympathetic to Catholics if not secret Catholics themselves, ardent Protestants pushed strict new test acts through parliament. The Test Act of 1673 required men to ascribe to both the oath of supremacy and allegiance and also to deny transubstantiation. More restrictive even than the Elizabethan oaths, this religious test barred even Catholics who saw their first allegiance as being to king rather than pope.⁴⁰

Both Catholic and Protestant objectors to these oaths of office and allegiance caused casuistry to become a major philosophical undertaking in the seventeenth century. Treatises on how and why oaths could be broken without jeopardizing a man's soul proliferated throughout England and the rest of the Western World. These works spelled out the early modern worldview that underpinned all oaths. First, belief in God was universal in the Western world. Even those intellectuals who might challenge some tenets of Christian theology, such as the divinity of Jesus, believed that there was a

⁴⁰ Cressy, 174.

supreme being. Second, to be a full citizen one needed to believe in a future system of rewards and punishments. Without a belief in an afterlife and ultimate judgment, the punishment of God held no weight. Third, civil authorities could require oaths for allegiance or participation in the government, but they could not compel a human soul to submit to an oath. An oath coerced under threat of death, or according to certain casuists, imprisonment, expulsion, or bodily harm, could not bind a man on earth or in heaven. Finally, oaths held both religious and political weight and as such were fundamental to the workings of a Christian society. People who objected to oaths on religious grounds recognized that they were stepping outside the bounds of orthodox Christian belief and many believed that such heterodoxy marked them as “true” Christians in a sea of pretenders.

As casuists elaborated the system of oath-taking in the early modern world, England established a bevy of oaths to bind citizens to the nation. The nation also developed a national form for taking an oath. In England, citizens knelt while swearing and completed the oath by kissing the Bible. This form was contested by some dissenters as being to “popish,” and some insisted on placing one hand on the Bible and raising the other towards God instead. This digression in ritual was enough to ostracize citizens as well because some justices refused to accept the divergent oath ritual as legitimate. Similarly, Quakers and other radical dissenters who objected to swearing for any reason often tried to substitute the word “affirm” for the offending word “swear.” They felt that their solemn assurance to follow the proscription of the oath, backed by their personal record of piety, should be enough to guarantee their behavior. Most government officials, however, viewed such affirmations with suspicion because they opened up the

oath-taker's soul to question. Who could know if the oath-taker was truly pious, or merely pretending in order to take advantage of a religious scruple?

The English Civil War was another powerful moment for creating Protestant national holidays. Moving even farther than Edward or Elizabeth had, Cromwell's government purged the remaining traditional religious festivals from the calendar. This negation of tradition left the calendar virtually free of "sacred time" with the exception of Sundays, Easter, and Christmas. There were no more established breaks from even agricultural labor and little incentive for landowners to provide such breaks to their workers. The only exception to this unexceptional calendar was the institution of nationwide thanksgiving and fast day celebrations and other patriotic events such as the 5th of November. While thanksgivings and fast day celebrations were not altogether novel holidays, they were not typically celebrated in isolation; thanksgiving was a routine part of most religious feasts as fast days had previously been required for the taking of the Eucharist and traditional during Lent and other liturgical celebrations.⁴¹

While thanksgivings were especially embraced by Protestants, because it lacked an emphasis on saints or other Catholic symbols, they were celebrated by Protestants and Catholics alike throughout Europe. In England, thanksgivings were regularly called for, both at the local and national level. Thus, especially in England, thanksgivings and fast days were associated with the well-being of the nation and were seen as both religious

⁴¹ What is most important for the discussion of English holidays, however, is that both thanksgiving and fasting were traditional religious events in the country. However, until the English Civil War they had been attached to saint's festivals and other events in the liturgical calendar, not as holidays in their own right. The Puritan impulse of the Civil War prompted officials to seek out holidays which were free of Catholic rite and these two rituals fit both the Protestant emphasis on worship and the need to consolidate national feeling.

and political events in ways that other religious traditions, such as Lenten fasting or Christmas, were not. Even after the Restoration, England continued to call for days of fasting and thanksgiving for the benefit of the nation rather than the spiritual health of the nation's citizens. For example, the 1750 edition of the Book of Common Prayer contained thanksgiving prayers for general occasions (including after the yearly harvest), after a storm, for specific political events, and for the successful delivery from an enemy.⁴²

The increasingly cozy relationship between religious belief and political identity was the impetus behind the creation of several new religio-political rituals. In particular, religious affirmations of the state such as thanksgivings and fast days became popular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While Catholic countries celebrated thanksgivings as well, these two holidays were a particularly Protestant experience, especially in those areas that embraced forms of Calvinism. Calvinist theology assured practitioners that they could do nothing to gain entry into Heaven or prevent their souls from dwelling in hell, but it also taught that good works would naturally occur in those who were among the elect. Thus, a nation of Calvinist believers would acknowledge the good things that God had done in the world through thanksgiving, and lament the sins that human beings had inevitably done through fasting. *Sola Scriptura* was a key Calvinist theology, and words were prized more than ritual—the growing importance of

⁴² For more information on the liturgy in the early modern world see; Katie Maag and John Witvliet, *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.) David Cressy has documented the emergence of thanksgiving in England in his excellent work *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 1989). Thanksgiving prayers are found in every edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*. The Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1750.

the sermon rather than the Eucharist is just one example.⁴³ According to this providential theology, a nation's fortunes could be made or destroyed by its inhabitants' religious devotion. Thus, thanksgiving and fast days became important demonstrations of national religious piety.

Rituals in the Colonies

Colonists throughout the English empire brought with them an engrained sense of tradition and propriety when it came to religio-political rituals. Although they also developed their own distinct rituals and stylistic interpretations of English behavior, colonists in America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the Empire routinely drew on early modern English ritual to bolster their own fledgling governments.⁴⁴ It was thus entirely fitting for the colonists on board the *Susan Constant*, *Discovery*, and *Godspeed* to hold a thanksgiving service for their safe arrival in Virginia. Celebrating such a holiday in a wild country without a church building or an imagined country-wide community to join with in prayer, however, made the event starkly different than a thanksgiving back in England; nor did the differences between colonial and metropolitan celebration end there. In England, thanksgivings and fast days were called for by the crown, but in the colonies governors could call for such occasions if they saw fit. Massachusetts passed a law in 1636 which granted the governor the power to “command solemn days of humiliation by

⁴³ Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ Barbados called for days of thanksgiving throughout the seventeenth century as did Antigua in the eighteenth.

fasting, etc. and also thanksgivings as occasion shall be offered.”⁴⁵ Plymouth colony allowed the clergy to determine when such events were proper until after 1668, and the uncertainty over whether thanksgivings and fast days were civil or ecclesiastical in nature persisted in Connecticut into the eighteenth century. New York also celebrated thanksgivings as both a Dutch and an English colony. Like the New England colonies, New York’s governor could proclaim these holidays as he saw fit. Pennsylvania, in a testament to its attempts to allow religious toleration, seems not to have celebrated colony-wide thanksgivings unless called upon by the monarch. In Virginia, thanksgiving days were proclaimed by the governor after Bacon’s Rebellion, and the colony had laws which required ministers to proclaim thanksgiving and fast days from the pulpit in a timely manner.⁴⁶

The earliest colonists brought thanksgiving and fast day rituals with them to the new world and used these events both to draw colonists together in times of trial and to assure God of their continued devotion to Him and His cause. Both rituals were used in individual colonies and thanksgivings were often called for by the crown for the entire empire. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was in some senses bookended by thanksgivings proclaimed by two different kings. In January of 1688, King James called for a thanksgiving in honor of his pregnant wife. This thanksgiving was sometimes

⁴⁵ Massachusetts, William Henry Whitmore, and Boston (Mass) City Council, *The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts: Reprinted from the Edition of 1672 : with the Supplements Through 1686*, (Rockwell and Churchill, 1887.)

⁴⁶ Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: An Inquiry into the Religious, Moral and Educational, Legal, Military, and Political Condition of the People Based on Original and Contemporaneous Records*, (G.P. Putnam’s sons, 1910,) 16-17. Accessed through Google books.

mocked and the Queen's pregnancy openly questioned. After the Glorious Revolution, William and Mary called for an empire-wide thanksgiving in celebration of their successful assumption of the throne in 1688. This thanksgiving established a precedent; from this point on, only thanksgivings were ever called throughout the empire and only for matters of great national importance—the birth of a crown prince, the success of British forces, or the coronation of a new monarch. Fast days, on the other hand, became local events which were called for matters of local importance such as floods, earthquakes, Indian raids, or other catastrophes.

By the eighteenth century, thanksgivings throughout the empire were most often reserved for military victories against other European powers. These celebrations were especially pertinent for American colonists because the battles frequently took place within colonial borders. During the Seven Years War, George III called for a day of thanksgiving for the taking of Quebec in “all His Majesty's *American Colonies*, particularly who are so nearly interested in the Happy Events, which gave occasion for this Proclamation.”⁴⁷ New Englanders had been especially central to the Quebec campaign and in New Hampshire governor Benning Wentworth's thanksgiving proclamation, he noted that the King had signified “His commands to me” that the colony should especially celebrate the day; thus reinforcing both the importance of thanksgiving and the role of the governor as an intermediary between colonists and the King.

The crown did not call for empire-wide fast days. This fact is interesting because fast days were routine both in New England and in England itself. There are a number of reasons why fast days were not celebrated throughout the empire as thanksgiving days

⁴⁷ *New Hampshire Gazette*, March 7th 1760.

were. First, fast days were not as intimately connected with the well-being of the nation as thanksgiving days. Second, fast days were more closely connected with separatist religious beliefs which, while tolerated by the crown, were not necessarily encouraged by that authority. Finally, fast days were most often a response to a localized tragedy or natural disaster. For example, when earthquakes struck New England in 1727 and when a particularly distressing illness surfaced in Charleston in 1732, both Massachusetts and South Carolina called for fast days to atone for the sins that the colonists supposed had provoked God's ire.⁴⁸ While fast days were important for maintaining God's covenant with his people, they were not important national events prior to the American Revolution. They were local responses to local needs where thanksgiving days could be the consequence of either local or national occurrences.

American colonials had decisive views on both thanksgiving and fasting rituals prior to the Revolution. They had a clear sense of the reasons for such events and the customs which should surround the celebrations. In all circumstances, thanksgivings and fast days were weekdays set aside like the Sabbath, so all colonists should attend church services. For Anglicans, such days included sung anthems and specific liturgical prayers. In New York, the newspapers frequently reported the success of such anthems and who participated as the *New York Gazette* did December 1st, 1760. The Thanksgiving anthem sung for the governor's return from Canada was "well-chosen" and performed to "great satisfaction."⁴⁹ Because most colonies did not allow colonists to work on these special occasions, family gatherings, dances, and bonfires were frequently held on thanksgivings.

⁴⁸ A variety of sermons from New England's earthquake fast days were published in 1728. South Carolina's fast day activities are harder to identify, but the event was recorded in numerous letters and newspaper reports.

⁴⁹ *New York Gazette*, December 1st 1760.

Fast days were quieter, but still generally involved some communal gathering outside of the church service.⁵⁰

Another development of the eighteenth century was that increasingly government officials took control of thanksgiving and fast day proclamations. Throughout the colonial period, thanksgiving and fast days were called either by secular authorities or by the clergy. During the eighteenth century, colonial governors and town councils gradually asserted their right to call for these celebrations although they instructed the clergy to spread the word about the holidays to their congregations. This solidification of tradition was in line with the increasingly bureaucratic and centralized powers of colonial officials. Such centralization also resulted in more coordinated empire-wide thanksgiving events. One example of this attempt to unify the disparate colonies with the English mainland is George III's thanksgiving for the seizure of Quebec which was celebrated throughout the empire. When King George called for a fast day throughout England and Wales in 1761, the proclamation was reprinted throughout the American colonies as well, although it is unclear whether the colonists celebrated the day.

Oaths had been a centerpiece of colonial life since the seventeenth century. Separated from the motherland by an ocean which most colonists would never cross, oaths of allegiance established a connection between sovereign and his subjects which transcended physical boundaries. These promissory oaths assured the monarch that his subjects would remain loyal and the colonists that the government would protect their bodies and culture. In addition, the colonial governments were set up to include courts of

⁵⁰ Many colonies required that shops be closed on thanksgiving and fast days. These events were treated like the Sabbath and those who openly worked could be prosecuted.

law which required that witnesses swear their testimony and oaths of office which bound government officials to uphold the interests of crown and country. While all of these oaths made national identity and religious belief visible, the unsettled nature of the colonies also demonstrated how fragile such identity could be. Many colonies changed imperial hands—and those empires often required the colonists to swear new allegiances. Most spectacular was the oath which underlay the expulsion of the French Acadians in the 1750's.⁵¹ Less obvious, but no less important—especially once war was inevitable between Britain and America—were the oaths of naturalization that the British required of the immigrants from Germany, France, and elsewhere. These oaths were fresh in immigrants' memories as the war approached and colored these new British citizens' opinions towards war. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, an immigrant pastor of a mostly immigrant church, noted in his journal that when Pennsylvania was creating a loyalty oath, some Germans petitioned that the renunciation of British loyalty be left out. The Germans said that if it was left in, they would be unable to take the oath since they had already sworn to be loyal in their oaths of naturalization.⁵² Oaths were serious and were taken seriously. The punishment on earth for breaking an oath may have been a fine or even expulsion from the colony, but the eternal punishment for breaking an oath was damnation.

⁵¹ Andrew John Bayly Johnston, "Borderland Worries: Loyalty Oaths in Acadie /Nova Scotia, 1654-1755," *French Colonial History* 4 (2003): 31-48.

⁵² Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* Vol. 1, (Philadelphia: Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States, 1942), June 1st, 1778, 153.

Colonial oaths also underscored the religious differences amongst colonists. Many of the divisions that rent the religious landscape of the colonies traced back to the development of Protestantism in England. Anglican theology attempted to balance Calvinist sparseness regarding sacraments and religious expression with the Catholic legacy of ritual in all aspects of life. Although the church did have rather capacious coattails and incorporated a wide swath of opinions, certain religious rituals proved too much for both the Puritan and High-Church factions. Thus, Puritan Massachusetts was constantly on guard against papal rituals. Instead of worship revolving around the priest and the Eucharist, in New England religious experiences centered on the Bible as God's Word.⁵³ For oaths, then, rather than kneeling and kissing the Bible Puritans placed one hand (typically the left) on the Bible and raised the right towards heaven. This method of oath taking also took place in Scotland, that hotbed of Calvinism, and eventually in the other North American colonies as well. In a book describing religious ceremonies in 1799, William Hurd noted that the King of Great Britain swore to uphold the Church of Scotland in "the Scottish fashion, by holding up his right hand..."⁵⁴ A few years before

⁵³ Especially during the first century of its development, New England was constantly aware of the threat of the Pope. Overt religious ceremonies were all but crushed, but as many historians have noted, their rituals almost fetishized the Bible and its reading. See for example, Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ William Hurd, *A new universal history of the religious rites, ceremonies, and customs of the whole world: or, A complete and impartial view of all the religions in the various nations of the universe both ancient and modern, from the creation down to the present time: To which is added, a geographical description of the various parts, the religious rites and ceremonies of whose inhabitants are described* (London: Printed by J. Hemingway, 1799), 647. Accessed from Google books.

the Revolution, New York considered elaborating that this Calvinist method of oath taking was equally acceptable, however, this act was dismissed by the colonial council as unnecessary.⁵⁵ By the time of the war, New England universally used this manner of taking an oath and almost all colonies allowed either form.

This Calvinist manner of taking an oath was not practiced universally in the colonies, however, and was in fact actively suppressed in some places. Throughout the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey, oaths were typically taken in the Anglican manner by kneeling and kissing the gospels. As the oath controversies in New Jersey and Pennsylvania will demonstrate, for some High-Church Anglicans, the only oath ritual that should be recognized in the empire was the Anglican mode. For Anglican ministers, the issue of oaths would cause political and religious crises of conscience because they had taken additional oaths of allegiance to the King as head of the church in their ordination oaths.

The early modern ritual traditions of oath-taking, thanksgiving, and fasting underscored religious homogeneity within a burgeoning nation-state. Even in the colonies, colonists could rely on these rituals to provide cultural stability and to remind subjects of the beliefs of the nation. As men assembled in Philadelphia for the first Continental Congress, they faced a new and unprecedented problem; how to unite people who did not share religious beliefs or ethnic backgrounds without the bonds of monarch and empire. Many delegates seized on these early modern rituals for such unifying power. When the Continental Congress first assembled in Philadelphia in 1774, it was

⁵⁵Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1814), 153. Accessed from Google books.

not clear that such camaraderie would ever be established amongst the delegates who brought with them a hodgepodge of religious beliefs, political traditions, and opinions on the state of the American Colonies. Many of the delegates questioned whether such a heterogeneous group could ever accomplish any meaningful action against Great Britain. Early in the session Thomas Cushing moved that the Congress assemble for prayer delivered by a clergyman, as had been the tradition in several colonies. Some delegates, especially John Jay of New York and John Rutledge of South Carolina, opposed this ritual because as John Adams noted “we were so divided in religious Sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians and some Congregationalists, so that we could not join in the same Act of Worship.”⁵⁶ This resistance again reflected colonial traditions as most colonies had at least a semblance of religious establishment that dictated the form of liturgy and prayer for government assembly. Massachusetts’ assembly, for example, was almost entirely comprised of Congregationalists while South Carolina and Virginia’s delegates were nominally Anglican, although they held widely varying beliefs on the relationship between church and state. These colonies celebrated Christian worship differently, and the Anglican insistence on ritualized prayer and liturgy would clash with Congregational insistence on a sermon.

This clash with early modern tradition could have spelled the end of congressional communal worship and jeopardized the group’s attempt to find common ground on which to build their opposition to Great Britain. As unorthodox as it was, some delegates

⁵⁶Paul Smith, ed. *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, (Washington: Library of Congress, 1976,) Vol. 10, 74.

preferred to drop religious rituals altogether rather than risk opening another avenue for disagreement. Eventually, Samuel Adams stood up and, according to his cousin John, declared that he “was no Bigot, and could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country.”⁵⁷ Regardless of the man's denomination, Samuel Adams asserted that he was happy to partake of a religious celebration of the Congress' goals with his fellow delegates and that religious plurality was preferable to Congress forgoing religious observance. Samuel Adams' assertion that he was “no bigot” seemed to change the tone of the debate over congressional prayer. Jay and Rutledge's concerns were rebuffed by other delegates who were in favor of the proposal because this new assembly should have “Reverence and submission to the Supreme Being and [should be] supplicating his Blessing on every Undertaking.”⁵⁸ These men pulled from tradition to argue that a political body needed religious unity not only so that their constituents would see their virtuous actions, but so that God would be on their side. Those who raised voices in objection did so on practical grounds including; what form of prayer could be used when there was such diversity of religious belief, whether this action would be seen as political maneuvering, or whether such prayer would be interpreted as an act of religious enthusiasts interested only in proclaiming their sect the appropriate religion for America.

The result of this debate was the installation of Jacob Duche as temporary chaplain to the Congress and on Wednesday September 7, he appeared before that body to lead them in prayer. John Adams wrote to Abigail and described the service which

⁵⁷Ibid

⁵⁸Smith, *Letters of the Delegates to the Continental Congress*, Vol. 10, pg. 74. John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 7th, 1774.

included several prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer*, a reading of the 35th Psalm, and finally an extempore prayer for the inhabitants of Boston. Adams claimed that “It has had an excellent Effect upon every Body here.”⁵⁹ The prayer called for God to “Be Thou present...and direct the Councils of this Hon. Assembly. Enable them to settle Things—upon the best and surest foundations...Shower down upon them and the Millions they here represent such Temporal Blessings as Thou Seest Expedient for them in this World and Crown them with Everlasting Glory in the World to Come.”⁶⁰ For Adams this first attempt at demonstrating the virtuous nature of the Continental Congress as well as founding their difficult debates in a shared religious experience was a success because the Continental Congress had established that religious practice and early modern ritual would continue to hold a place in this new nation. As the next chapters will discuss, Congress did not stop there, but continued to weave oath, thanksgiving, and fast day rituals into the fabric of American life.

Considerable changes had already occurred to oath, thanksgiving, and fast day rituals before the American Revolution. The colonies with their abundant pluralism and increasingly democratic forms of governance shifted the emphasis of these events from stressing the connection between established church and civil authority to the assertion that God imbued citizens with power and authority and would help to guide such a Christian nation. And yet, these rituals continued to have political and religious power in America because they were early modern rituals. Their existence at all levels of government demonstrated that America was a legitimate European nation which sought to cultivate its citizen’s morality and virtue. Oaths, thanksgivings, and fast days were

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

religio-political rituals. What Americans had to decide was not whether such events would continue in the new nation, but what kind of religion they would represent, who they would exclude from the political process, and how the American government would regulate, enforce, and proclaim such rituals.

2. Establishing Loyalty and Religious Toleration; Oaths of Allegiance and Office before 1789

In the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* on September 26, 1776, an editorial signed by “A Follower of Christ” lamented the lack of religion in Pennsylvania’s proposed constitution by asserting that the state was falling away from the behavior not just of other Christian countries, but of Jews and Muslims as well. “The Jew swears upon the Thorah,” he noted, “the Mahomedan the Alcoran, the Protestants in Germany by the Holy Trinity, the English kiss the New Testament, the Roman Catholics the holy cross. But the Pennsylvanians swear by nothing. What oaths may we expect, if all religious awe is removed?”⁶¹ This concerned citizen underscored many truths about eighteenth-century oaths. First, he understood that oaths had an important religious aspect which gave them power; a ‘religious awe.’ Second, he recognized that other religions, even Muslims, had specific oath rituals that used objects of religious reverence, such as the Koran, to bind oath-takers to the truth. Finally, this writer recognized that governments were attached to particular religious beliefs; Catholic countries took oaths on the holy cross while Anglican England kissed the New Testament. Without an established religious persuasion, and without any need for religious belief, Pennsylvania’s oath looked and sounded remarkably different from its European and even its Muslim counterparts.

⁶¹ ‘A Follower of Christ,’ *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia, PA) September 26, 1776.

Pennsylvanians of many backgrounds and religious denominations worried that their oaths would not restrict immoral men from the government nor inspire continued morality from the average government official.

Pennsylvanians were not alone in their concerns about oaths in the new nation. Citizens throughout this young republic worried that oaths of office and allegiance and religious test oaths were either so inclusive that no religious belief was necessary for citizenship or so restrictive that pious men would be excluded from participation in the government. As “A follower of Christ” also demonstrates, the specter of Muslims and Jews becoming important participants in the new state governments was not only a piece of inflammatory rhetoric. Many citizens feared that removing oaths and oath rituals would create an environment where there was no political difference between the oaths of Christians and Muslims. The editorialist demonstrates this concern in his insistence that each religion had its own manner of oath taking; without proscribing a Christian mode, there was nothing to prevent men from concealing their true religious identity from the public. In the creation of the state constitutions, the primacy of Christianity was carefully guarded through test oaths and religious requirements for officeholders. This assurance that Christianity would remain the religion associated with America allowed citizens to consider changes to oath rituals and test oaths that would lead to religious freedom.

This chapter examines the development of oaths in several states, specifically Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and South Carolina. The case studies in this chapter demonstrate the various issues government officials faced such as the scrupulous sects that refused to swear an oath, denominations which had theological concerns about the form of the oath, and groups who favored restrictive oaths at the expense of conscientious

citizens. Pennsylvania faced contention about test oaths from both political and religious fronts, New Jersey created an incredibly liberal oath of allegiance and oath of office yet still encountered petitions for further religious freedoms, and South Carolina sought to create a liberal constitution on the bones of an established church. While not exhaustive of the American oath experience, these case studies are representative of how politicians and citizens worked out appropriate compromises during an exceedingly chaotic era.

All three of these states had significant minority populations who objected to either the principle of oaths or the ritual form of oath-taking in English colonies. These three states also represent a cross-section of America; South Carolina demonstrates Southern political concerns and the established church tradition, Pennsylvania demonstrates the diversity of the middle colonies and the consequences of a long history without establishment, and New Jersey, although also a middle colony, represents the religious concerns of minority Congregationalists and provides a different view of their theology than studying Massachusetts would bring. As the revolution approached, newly formed assemblies and associations worked to create oaths of allegiance and office that would protect the fledgling nation from loyalists, atheists, and oath-breakers. As each state struggled to define what it meant to be a citizen, officials encountered those who hesitated at restrictive oath clauses and those who coveted them. The negotiation between these two viewpoints was often expressed in the new state constitutions which reflected varying levels of religious toleration.

The process of creating, debating, and revising oaths throughout the period demonstrates how engaged new Americans were with creating a Christian citizenry. Petitions and objections to various oath rituals, wordings, and requirements forced the

country to deal with its religious diversity and to define what it meant to be an American. The state constitutions created in the wake of the Declaration of Independence often stressed that to participate in the political process, citizens needed to be Protestant, believe in a future system of rewards and punishments, and be willing to participate in an oath ritual. Yet, a variety of religious sects and individuals presented challenges to this definition by arguing that they were good, patriotic citizens who objected to specific aspects of these oaths. As politicians and the public more generally debated these objections and changed oath wordings and forms to accommodate scrupulous citizens, they also reshaped what it meant to be American and the limits that could be placed on religious freedom in America.

The Associations and the Oaths of Allegiance

The first step towards creating new state governments and creating a definition of American citizenship was the development of associations in response to the closure of the Port of Boston in 1774. These associations called subscribers in every North American colony to avoid British goods, promise mutual protection from British soldiers, and protest the British Coercive Acts in a variety of ways. Typically, the association was not solidified by oath, but by a solemn declaration or subscription to uphold the terms listed in the association. Associations skirted the myriad issues inherent in an oath, but also did not threaten the associate with divine retribution if the association was violated. And many individuals did rescind their allegiance to these associations. Enforcing these articles of association was one of the chief responsibilities of committees of safety, who often required subscribers suspected of switching allegiances to take oaths in the presence of the committee in order to prove their loyalty. Some versions of these associations,

however, specifically noted that subscribers needed to swear their allegiance to the association. This was the case in Annapolis, Maryland which called all of its male inhabitants to join the association “on oath” in May of 1774.⁶² In Pennsylvania, the committee of correspondence specified in 1775 that subscribers of the association could swear or affirm an oath to uphold the articles in an attempt to secure the allegiance of Quaker merchants within Philadelphia.⁶³

These early associations and oaths of allegiance reflected societal concerns over the Catholicism of Quebec and the scruples, both political and religious, of sects such as the Quakers. The Quebec Act of 1774 sparked fear in the hearts of New England Congregationalists that Catholics could soon hold power in North America because the act expanded Quebec’s territory down the west side of the Mississippi to the mouth of the river. After having vigorously opposed allowing Quebec’s French population to remain Catholic after Britain gained control of the colony in the Treaty of Paris in 1763, New Englanders now found themselves theoretically surrounded by Catholic territory. Colonists focused their anger about the increased presence of Catholics on British soil by asserting that the King had forsworn his coronation oath. This sacred oath, they asserted, required him to protect and uphold the Protestant religion, and he had instead perverted this oath by allowing former French Catholics to practice their religion in the British colonies.⁶⁴ It was through such supposed betrayals of his coronation oath that colonists

⁶² “Annapolis, Maryland May 26,” *Newport Mercury*, June 13th 1774.

⁶³ “Committee Chamber, September 19th,” *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, September 25th 1775.

⁶⁴ “From the Public Ledger, to the People of the British Empire,” *Essex Journal*, December 14th 1774. New Englanders viewed the Quebec Act as a perjurious act and

could begin to find ways to create their opposition to his government. For colonists who had taken the oath of allegiance to the English monarch for the entirety of their lives, or for as long as they had been citizens in the case of Germans, Dutch, and other foreigners, the oath was a real, tenable tie to the King and the British government. In a society where oaths were still considered binding in this world and the next, any supposed breach of the King's coronation oath was an issue to be addressed or exploited.

While the Continental Congress argued that the king had broken his coronation oath in any number of ways, they were also trying to solidify their position as the lead governing body of the associated colonies. Often, however, Congress found itself amending decisions made by generals in battle or by individual colonies. March 1776 found the Congress in just this position as General Lee informed them that he (as a military officer) had required the citizens of Virginia to submit to a loyalty oath as a test of their political associations. Appalled at this decision, the Continental Congress immediately resolved "that no oath by way of test be imposed upon, exacted, or required of any of the inhabitants of these colonies, by any military officers."⁶⁵ The Congress thought that oaths *should* be used as tests, but that they must be legislated either by the Congress itself or by the legislatures of the respective states. Oaths were important, according to the Continental Congress, and allowing the military to usurp legislative powers on such an issue would set a dangerous precedent for the future because oaths

some justified their rebellion by stating that their loyalty oaths were voided by the King's actions against the Protestant Religion. Other colonies clearly considered this position as well; the piece was republished in newspaper throughout the colonies including Maryland, Virginia, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere.

⁶⁵ United States Continental Congress et al., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (U.S. Govt. print off., 1906), 195.

made under duress or threat of immediate harm could not be binding. Allowing the military to administer loyalty oaths, then, would allow colonists to switch their allegiances as they saw fit.

Congress did not, however, immediately call for a national test oath, leaving that decision instead to the states. As a consequence, the states enacted over thirteen different oaths of allegiance and faced objections to these oaths for religious and political reasons. These objections varied from those who objected to oaths for religious reasons (such as Quakers, Mennonites, Dunkers, and other small sects) to those who had already sworn loyalty to King George (such as Anglican ministers and recently naturalized citizens) and felt themselves unable to renege on the religiously binding oaths. While conscientious objectors were a particular problem in the Middle Atlantic States, citizens throughout the colonies had already pledged themselves to King George, making oaths problematic across the nation. As the new states struggled to ascertain the loyalty of their citizens, they developed varying strategies for dealing with those who refused oaths, such as allowing conscientious objectors to affirm their oath rather than swear or ritualizing the rejection of the king in order to make those with political considerations more comfortable. In every situation, the goal for the various governments was to bind as many new citizens as possible to the patriot cause regardless of religious concerns and so most states were willing to make sacrifices about the form and function of oaths in order to accommodate these conscientious people.

Eventually, the Continental Congress did seek to regulate the loyalty oath to the new American nation. They began by enacting a loyalty oath in 1776 to be taken by anyone holding a federal office such as postmasters and military officers. This oath

illustrates the general form such oaths of allegiance took. Government officials promised with God as their witness that they did “acknowledge the United States of America to be Free, Independent, and Sovereign States, and declare that the people thereof owe no allegiance, or obedience to George the Third, King of Great Britain; and I renounce, refuse, and abjure any allegiance and obedience to him” after which they took an oath of office to uphold their positions and defend the nation against the King.⁶⁶ This oath was layered and provided a way for those who feared the civil and sacred ramifications of oath breaking to be contented that they had done neither. One of the most important aspects to breaking ties with the mother country was to break the bond between King and subject. This typically involved creating an oath of abjuration which removed the subjects’ obligation to the King, followed by an oath of allegiance to the citizen’s new nation, America. This oath of abjuration was an incredibly important part of the process of renouncing British subjecthood because it allowed American citizens to feel as though they had not broken their oaths of allegiance while also publically declaring that King George *had* broken his coronation oath. As men from every colony took this oath of abjuration and allegiance, they made a visible declaration through an early modern ritual that because of his actions the King had lost the allegiance of his subjects.

While the Continental Congress had been careful to provide theologically cautious citizens with a method for removing themselves from their oaths of allegiance to the King without jeopardizing their souls, the congress did not specify the manner in which this oath of allegiance should be taken nor any signifiers of the religiosity of the

⁶⁶ United States Continental Congress, *I [blank] do acknowledge the United States of America to be free, independent and sovereign states, and declare that the people thereof owe no allegiance or obedience to George the Third, King of Great-Britain* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1776.)

oath such as having people swear by the Holy Trinity. Instead, decisions about which oath ceremonies were acceptable in the new United States were left to the justices who witnessed the oaths and state and local governments. This lack of guidance or direction on the form of the oath could have been political savvy; an attempt to remain distanced from religious matters while allowing states and localities to assert their own traditional understanding of oaths. It could also have been an oversight made by a governing body dealing with a civil war while attempting to unify colonies that had rarely worked together. In reality, the decision to omit any solemn invocation of the deity was most likely an attempt to encourage as many citizens as possible to participate and to solidify the state governments as the arbiters of religious tolerance.

By leaving decisions about religious requirements to the states, the Continental Congress established a precedent that the federal government would not dictate religious requirements for political participation. This nod towards religious freedom did not mean that the federal government sanctioned removing religious obligation from oaths, but rather that they left the exact religious requirements to the states who would know best what were the religious proclivities of their citizens. And so, the states would be left without guidance by Congress to decide what the minimum religious requirements for active citizenship would be. These debates would shape American public religious behavior for years to come.

Pennsylvania

Because William Penn had established Pennsylvania with the intention of extending religious toleration to Quakers, among others, oath-taking had been a particularly fraught

notion. Quakers and other smaller Christian sects, objected to all oaths; they cited scripture such as Matthew 5: 34-37 which reads

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

While most Christian denominations took this scripture as an admonishment not to take frivolous oaths, Quakers, Mennonites, some Baptists, and other groups took the scripture as an injunction not to swear at all. In Pennsylvania, Quakers and other scrupulous religious sects had the right to affirm rather than swear their oaths—a right not offered in many European lands. This right was so important in the colony that oaths in general were rare. In fact, in the first Frame of Government given May 2, 1682, there was no oath required, even for witness testimony. A witness by “solemnly promising to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” would assure the government of his honesty.⁶⁷

In 1772, the General Assembly passed an act for “the relief of such persons, as conscientiously scruple the taking of an Oath in the common form.” This act expanded the options for oath-takers concerning how an oath was sworn. Rather than kneeling and kissing the Bible, as had been the custom in England, those citizens who found this practice too reminiscent of Catholicism could choose to raise their hand towards God before swearing “by Almighty God, the searcher of all hearts.”⁶⁸ The General Assembly noted that because of their concerns, certain citizens had been imprisoned or banned from testifying in court. Both situations limited the effectiveness of good citizens who, as the

⁶⁷ William Penn, *Frame of Government*, May 2 1682.

⁶⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, PA), May 8th 1772.

act also noted, were still required to profess a belief in “GOD the Father, and in JESUS CHRIST, his only Son, and in the HOLY SPIRIT” as well as in the divine inspiration of the Bible in order to hold any office.⁶⁹ While in Europe both the wording and ritual of an oath had been deeply contested, the colonies were often willing to accommodate varying rituals so long as the oath, and religious tests attached to it, was kept intact in order to attract colonists from across the European continent. In the years leading up to the Revolution, Pennsylvania had taken steps to ensure that good Christian citizens could continue to participate in the political process despite beliefs that were not in line with most established confessions. Even before the American Revolution, Pennsylvania had begun to define good citizens as Christian citizens who should be free to express their religious beliefs so long as they conformed to certain general beliefs.

In spite of the state’s accommodations for the so-called scrupulous sects, the oath of allegiance the state enacted in 1777 tied military service to an oath without the option to affirm. Quakers, Mennonites, and others objected that this oath was a double burden on their denominations which objected both to oaths and to military action. Many members of these denominations paid heavy fines and even served jail time because of their refusal to take the oath of allegiance. Some members of these sects chose to take the oath rather than pay these consequences; many of these men were thrown out of their churches or chose to leave themselves, but the Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania split over the oath issue. Christian Funk, a young Mennonite bishop who had been born in America, and a group of his followers were banned from the church for taking the loyalty oath to the American government.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

In his memoir “A Mirror for All People,” Funk wrote about his attempts to convince his fellow Mennonites that they could and should take the Oath of Allegiance and pay military taxes. Funk and other, younger Mennonites who had been born in the colony saw more danger to their religion and more government intrusion into religious belief in the British Empire than in the American government. These men saw the oaths and military taxes that the new government required as necessary to ensure the safety of the new American citizens. And, they saw the oath as a requirement for citizenship rather than a religious test. Funk preached this belief throughout the Mennonite churches in Lancaster and immediately created discord within the church. His fellow Mennonite preachers refused to take communion with him because they were not ‘at peace’ with Funk.⁷⁰ The main allegation against Funk and his fellow believers was that they had taken the Oath of Allegiance and had encouraged others to do the same. According to Funk, the ministers decided that, “He who is on the side of Congress has no word here...He who even leans toward the side of the Congress has no word here.”⁷¹ For the Mennonites, these oaths were not mere formalities, or meaningless assertions, but a matter of deep religious concern.

The disagreement between Christian Funk and the other Mennonite leaders was not resolved peacefully. In fact, the church shunned and banned Funk and his followers. The ban, or complete removal from the religious community, was a rare occurrence for American Mennonites although it was a hallmark of the followers of Joseph Amman—

⁷⁰ While some ministers may have been sympathetic to Funk’s cause, Mennonite communion required complete agreement, or no communion at all. Because some ministers were unhappy with Funk, he was not eligible to take communion.

⁷¹ Christian Funk, “A Mirror for All People” Trans. John C. Wenger, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 59 (January, 1985): 42-66.

the Amish, who had not yet fully broken with the Mennonite Church. Funk claimed that the ban had not been used by American Mennonites in over thirty years.⁷² Yet, the Funkites, as they were called, were expelled from the Mennonite church. The sole difference between Funk's church and the proper Mennonite church was that Funk's congregants had accepted the American government's definition of citizenship during the Revolution. This issue continued to prevent the Funkites from rejoining the Mennonites even after the war because Mennonites who had maintained their religious identity and refused to take the oath of allegiance had often suffered for this decision by being imprisoned, fined, or ostracized. Many other Mennonites moved to Canada with the staunch British loyalists because even after the war these religious adherents refused to take an oath to the new government. Thus, oaths, their religious obligations and their political ramifications defined Mennonite belief throughout the American Revolution and well into the early republic.

The religious obligations inherent in Pennsylvania's loyalty oath pushed some men who may have supported the patriot cause to remain loyal British subjects and the knowledge that religious belief could restrict men from citizenship was recognized by Pennsylvania's politicians; some politicians thought that such restrictions were necessary while others saw them as impediments that kept good men from public participation. Nowhere was this tension more evident than in the creation of Pennsylvania's constitution in 1776. All of the delegates to the convention swore their allegiance and also gave a profession of faith, yet their opinions on the role of religion in the new state were diverse to say the least. The constitution was rife with statements of religious belief

⁷²Ibid, 50.

and requirements of faith. The document's "bill of rights" stated that all citizens should enjoy their natural rights and "other blessings which the Author of existence has bestowed upon man."⁷³ Also in the Declaration of Rights, the convention specified that all citizens had the right to worship freely so long as they believed in God. Section Ten of the constitution required all legislative representatives to profess, but distinctly not swear, to a belief in God, a future system of rewards and punishments, and the divine inspiration of the scriptures.

After the proposed constitution was published in the newspapers, the public reacted both in favor of and against Pennsylvania's oath requirements. Some commentators applauded the frame of government while other citizens such as "A Follower of Christ" strongly objected to the lack of oaths in the new Constitution. "A Follower of Christ" noted that while the legislators were required to swear their allegiance to the state, they needed only to declare their belief in God. This citizen was concerned that not requiring an oath of religious belief would allow blasphemers, atheists, and perhaps even Muslims to become law makers in the state. In the ongoing dialogue between "Orator Puff and Peter Easy" published in the *Pennsylvania Ledger* in the fall of 1776, Orator Puff makes an exaggerated argument that this new frame of government made Deism the established religion of the colony. Orator Puff notes that the new constitution did away with the profession of faith legislators had been required to take under the previous Frame of Government and replaced it with what the orator considered a vague declaration of belief

⁷³ Constitution of Pennsylvania, 1776 "The Federal and State constitutions, colonial charters, and other organic laws of the state[s], territories, and colonies now or heretofore forming the United States of America /compiled and edited under the Act of Congress of June 30, 1906." Text, December 18, 1998.
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pa08.asp.

in a Supreme Being. In shock, Peter exclaims, “How can we ask or expect success, while we thus deliberately, in the face of the whole world, are undermining the religion graciously delivered to us by heaven with such amazing circumstances of mercy?”⁷⁴ This mock dialogue lampooned the constitution and its opponents but reflected a real concern for the lack of limits placed on religious freedom in the new Pennsylvanian constitution. When Peter questions whether the new constitution would in reality change the religious beliefs of the nation, since most citizens were Christian, Orator Puff makes one further argument about the lack of religion in the constitution. This lack of religion, he argues, may make the citizens in years to come less respectful towards Christianity because, as sinful creatures, they need to be reminded of their religious obligations.

Other citizens shared these concerns. The *Philadelphia Post* published the resolutions of a group of concerned citizens on October 22, 1776. Among these resolutions was the assertion that “in the Constitution formed by the said Convention, the CHRISTIAN religion is not treated with the proper respect.”⁷⁵ They also resolved that members of the assembly should not subscribe to the oath and religious test required by the constitution, but instead should take a different oath which required that the legislator believe not only in God, as per the constitution, but in “God the father, and in Jesus Christ his eternal son, and in the Holy Spirit, one God blessed forever more.”⁷⁶ These resolutions outlined the concern many Pennsylvanians had about the new constitution: the baseline of Christian belief was set so low that atheists, Jews or Muslims could

⁷⁴ “Orator Puff and Peter Easy,” *Pennsylvania Ledger*, October 12, 1776.

⁷⁵ “Philadelphia, October 22nd” *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, October 22nd, 1776.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

participate in the political system.⁷⁷ This group recognized that the legislators were required to declare their belief in God, but since they were not required to swear to their beliefs any atheist could lie in order to take their legislative seat.⁷⁸ Moreover, these citizens recognized that a belief in a Supreme Being did not restrict conscientious Jews or Muslims from the government. By requiring a belief in the trinity, however, this group hoped to limit the freedoms of conscience for government officials in order to protect both the morality of the government and the supremacy of Christianity in America.

The German Lutheran minister Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and other clergy in Philadelphia were equally wary of the state's new constitution. When the Anglican clergy visited Muhlenberg in October 1776 and shared their concerns over the new Constitution with him, Muhlenberg was concerned enough to speak out against the constitution not only in German to his parishioners, but in English to various powerful politicians within the city, something the German-born pastor rarely did. Muhlenberg viewed the religious test in the new constitution as deplorably lax because it lacked any

⁷⁷ Atheism meant something different in the early modern world than it does in modern use. An Eighteenth-century atheist was not necessarily aggressively anti-religion. Instead, the word indicated someone who did not believe in the existence in a deity, although they may have a use for religion generally. For a discussion on the development of atheism see: Michael Hunter, "The Problem of 'Atheism' in Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35, Fifth Series (January 1, 1985): 135-157. Nineteenth-century America still had definite laws against atheistic expression. See, Sarah Barringer Gordon, "Blasphemy and the Law of Religious Liberty in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 682-719.

⁷⁸ Clearly, an atheist could lie under a sworn oath as well, but the implications are different. If an atheist lied under oath, God would punish him at the judgment day harshly for falsely swearing before God. When these tests did not require the officeholder to swear, God was not a witness at the event and the sin would be treated as any other lie, not as a particular affront to God.

requirement of a belief in the trinity. But, rather than seeing this omission as simply a lack of Christian sentiment within the provincial assembly, Muhlenberg thought that

There are clever puppets behind the scenes who are acting according to the maxim, *devide et imperabis*. The courage of many a Christian-minded soul has fallen, for it has been observed how the beast with horns has been working in the background and cast the Christian religion out of the new form of government, in spite of the fact that, in the old constitution, Christianity was deemed by respectable and genuine Christians as precious and valuable as a pearl.⁷⁹

Muhlenberg saw the looser religious tests as a conspiracy meant to disparage the Christian faith for political purposes. As a clergyman, Muhlenberg was predisposed to see a world of lapsed belief. Yet, clearly Muhlenberg was not alone in his fears about the constitution. The active debate over the constitution and its religious obligations was typical of the ethnically and religiously diverse colony, but Pennsylvanians were not alone in questioning whether there should be a limit on religious freedom.

New Jersey's Quest for Religious Freedom and Legislative Morality

Throughout the Revolution, New Jersey consistently moved towards more liberal views on oath taking, in part through the protests of sects scrupulous of oaths and oath rituals. Like Pennsylvania, New Jersey had become increasingly heterogeneous in the years before the Revolution. In East Jersey, Dutch and Swedish immigrants had established communities which remained tied to their mother countries through their Reformed and Lutheran ministers. In West Jersey, German sectarians and Quakers had moved in from Pennsylvania. This variety of religious belief was only augmented by the growing importance of The College of New Jersey and the devout Calvinists who sent

⁷⁹ Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia: Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States, 1942), 2: 751, October 23rd, 1776.

their sons to the school for education. Along with this plurality of religious belief, by 1776 New Jersey was embroiled in war and was plagued with questions about its citizens' loyalties. These conditions meant that the New Jersey assembly was under pressure to accommodate a varied mix of citizens both religiously and politically, while protecting the fledgling state from destruction by loyalists, traitors, and immoral politicians.

New Jersey did not require a loyalty oath of its citizens until later in 1776. The oath, like that of many other colonies, had two parts; an oath of abjuration which rejected the King, and an oath of allegiance to the new government.⁸⁰ Besides the ritualized wording and the act of kneeling and kissing the Gospels, this dual oath also had another layer of ritual to it. By requiring the citizen to first renounce King George and then to swear allegiance to the new American government, there could be no concern (except for those who wanted to remain Anglican ministers) that they had broken an oath, or that they were still bound by the oath to the British Crown.

The constitution of New Jersey, unlike that of Pennsylvania, was not hotly contested by its citizens. Like most states, New Jersey required officeholders to have certain Christian beliefs. In this case, the constitution stipulated that they be Protestant, but did not specify any particular beliefs (such as the divine inspiration of the gospels) that these men were required to hold. Like Pennsylvania, the New Jersey constitution did not require officeholders to formally "swear" their oath. The constitution only asked

⁸⁰ I have had trouble tracking this particular oath down because of the chaotic environment in which it was enacted. I am drawing my analysis from the version of the oath found in W. Woodford Clayton and William Nelson, *History of Bergen and Passaic counties, New Jersey: with biographical sketches of many of its pioneers and prominent men* (Everts & Peck, 1882), 67. Accessed from Google books.

members of the assembly to “solemnly declare” their allegiance to the state without any reference to God. This was not merely a case of semantics—in ordinances which regulated oaths of allegiance and election procedures during the war, the provincial congress was careful to specify that the form of the oath was “I, do swear (or affirm)...” rather than the religiously void “I solemnly declare.” This declaration, however, was vague enough to allow all Christians (and atheists, Jews and Muslims) to participate in the government. While the Pennsylvania constitution at least required some statement of faith, New Jersey’s governing document stipulated that officeholders needed to be protestant Christians, but did not require these men to hold themselves accountable to this dictate.

New Jersey’s liberal constitution still did not remove all religious concerns about oaths. Shortly after the Constitution was approved, Governor William Livingston received a petition similar to the 1772 Pennsylvania act concerning the ritual actions of oaths. The General Assembly responded by writing an act titled “An Act for the ease and relief of such persons as are scrupulous of taking an oath with the ceremony of touching and kissing the Book of the Gospels, by allowing that of holding up the hand in lieu thereof.”⁸¹ The Act noted that until this time “no other [manner] was deemed and admitted legal” which indicates that the colonial government had only allowed the kneeling ritual for oath taking rather than raising the right hand.⁸² By restricting oath-takers to kneeling and kissing the gospels, the New Jersey government kept scrupulous

⁸¹ State of New Jersey, “An Act for the ease and relief of such persons as are scrupulous of taking an oath with the ceremony of touching and kissing the Book of the Gospels, by allowing that of holding up the hand in lieu thereof,” *New Jersey Gazette*, October 7th, 1778.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Congregationalists, Baptists, Mennonites, Quakers and others from political participation without requiring a religious test. The fact that such a petition was sent to the governor indicates that some individuals did choose religious piety at the expense of political action and also underscores the religious nature of oaths for eighteenth-century Americans. By requiring the English oath ceremony, New Jersey had a *de facto* religious test regardless of its liberal constitution.

Governor Livingston had encouraged the assembly to pass this act. He noted that it was not the wording but the “English Ceremony of kissing the Book” which the petitioners found objectionable and that these citizens should be released from their concern, asking “can it be consistent with sound Policy, or the generous Spirit of our Constitution, to debar an honest Man, for a religious Scruple, from the Privileges of Society, which the most profligate and abandoned are permitted to enjoy in the fullest Latitude?”⁸³ Livingston recognized that the religious requirement for active citizenship was too high; it kept out those pious individuals who were likely virtuous and moral while allowing “profligate” and morally questionable individuals full access to the political system. Livingston argued that such an arbitrary law made little sense and did not restrict the electorate in a profitable way. After all, Livingston concluded, this change in ritual was “beyond Question altogether formal, and in no Respect essential to its Nature or Solemnity” because an oath ceremony was still required; the options for New Jerseyans were either kneeling and kissing the Gospels or raising their right hand towards God. Affirmations were restricted to those who could demonstrate that they

⁸³ Livingston to the Assembly, *The Papers of William Livingston*, (Trenton, NJ: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1980), 2:147, May 29th 1778

belonged to a scrupulous sect. Yet, the change did demonstrate that citizens took their oaths and their oath rituals seriously. The need for new state governments allowed Americans the chance to evaluate the relationship between church and state as well as the judiciousness of their religious rituals. As the petitioners in New Jersey demonstrate, when citizens found this relationship lacking they sought solutions.

Often, scholars have assumed that the only objections to oath-taking came from the Quakers or smaller religious sects.⁸⁴ In this case, however, the concern was less about the oath than about its ritual. Those who had petitioned the General Assembly appeared not to have been adherents of an obscure religious sect, but rather the Congregationalists and Presbyterians affiliated with Princeton who had moved into the state in increasing numbers in the mid-eighteenth century. Unlike the requests made in other states to allow an affirmation rather than an oath, or to relieve the scrupulous sects, there is no mention made of a specific religious denomination which was oppressed by this ritual. Typically, those requests mentioned the Quakers, Mennonites or Dunkers, who were adamantly against oaths. The act in New Jersey mentioned only that “certain well-disposed persons” were jeopardized by the law. In other words, the strict requirement about the form of the oath punished not only those citizens whose religious beliefs fell outside the bounds of typical English Protestantism, but even impacted citizens from mainstream denominations who were expected to be an active part of this new nation. While Livingston championed allowing all religiously scrupulous citizens access to the political system, the act indicated that the assembly was particularly

⁸⁴ Almost all works on oath and conscientious objectors deal with these sects. See for example: Harold Melvin Hyman, *To Try Men's Souls: Loyalty Tests in American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). There has been far less attention paid to how more mainstream denominations understood oaths and oath rituals.

concerned that Congregationalists and Baptists not be barred from the government. The effect of the act was to allow any number of religiously conscientious individuals full citizenship even if the intention of some (or many) politicians was to open political participation for a few.

Shortly after the New Jersey constitution had been ratified, Governor William Livingston again brought the discussion about religion and the state to the people at large. In January and February 1778, Livingston wrote a series of letters to the New Jersey Gazette about the role religion should play in this new democratic society. Like many colonists, Livingston was nominally Presbyterian (actually he probably most identified with the Dutch Reformed church since his mother was Dutch), but attended church in Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed and other houses of worship. In his addresses to the General Assembly and in his newspaper editorials (in which his pen name was Cato) he elaborated a theory of religious freedom that would strengthen religion without sacrificing the virtue of the new democracy.

Cato's solution to the problem—separating church and state without sacrificing the virtue commanded by Christianity—required both men's hearts and bodies to be free from any religious obligations by the government. He offered a strikingly individual definition of religion, which emphasized the “inward habitual reverence for, and devotedness to, the Deity” rather than a communal experience. England, he said, did not restrict men's hearts, but it punished their bodies for not participating in certain common rituals.⁸⁵ Livingston pushed this logic further, arguing that if a Muslim became the head of the English government, then Islam would be the state church. In New Jersey,

⁸⁵ Cato, *The Papers of William Livingston*. 2: 234-238, February 18th, 1778.

however, since there was no state church, Christianity's unfailing truth would always make it the dominant religion of the people. Freedom of religion, Cato suggested, would lead to a more perfect expression of Christianity because it would not simply be another state institution. He argued that the New Jersey Constitution did this perfectly by requiring freedom of religion and that this freedom could not be changed because the legislature swore not to change this section of the document.⁸⁶ Government officials were not required to believe in the trinity, or even in a Supreme Being, yet Livingston was not advocating a society of atheists. Nor did the New Jersey Constitution allow atheists to hold office because lawmakers and judges still had to belong to a Protestant sect and peaceably attend to their religious obligations. What Livingston believed, and what the state of New Jersey enacted, was that true Christian citizens could only exist in a state which did not require a certain denominational affiliation.

The petition to loosen regulations on the form of oaths in New Jersey and Governor Livingston's subsequent publications on religious toleration were not the only experience New Jersey had with those who sought greater freedom of conscience. In December of 1785, the state legislature passed an act which would "confirm to the members of the church of the United Brethren in this state, the privilege of being admitted to take an affirmation instead of an oath."⁸⁷ This bill was read three times and unanimously passed into law. Although it was uncontested, the act is instructive because New Jersey had not explicitly limited the right of affirmation to certain sects. Thus, this

⁸⁶ The legislature swore a true oath and also allowed the option of affirming this declaration. The affirmation in particular demonstrated that the assembly viewed this oath as religious, because religiously scrupulous individuals could refrain from swearing.

⁸⁷ "Trenton, Dec. 5," *New Jersey Gazette*, December 5, 1785.

bill seems to be legally repetitive as the right to affirm was already granted. Many states had placed restrictions on the right of affirmation (typically to Quakers, Mennonites or Dunkers). New Jersey was not one of those. The wording of the loyalty oath in 1776 did include affirmations; the oaths of office in the constitution similarly allow an affirmation without limiting this right to certain sects. But, the petition by the United Brethren indicates that there was an assumption that only certain people (who were in some way identifiable) could affirm their oaths. Moreover, oath-taking must have retained its religious obligation for both the denomination and the congress to deem their concerns worthy of a law.

The petition by the United Brethren marks not only a continued religious understanding of an oath, but the creation of a new denomination with religious scruples. The 1770s and 1780s saw a proliferation of new, self-conscious denominations such as the Baptists and Methodists. These groups, unlike their Congregationalist, Presbyterian and Anglican predecessors, banded together not only through theology but through an ecclesiastic hierarchy which had not often existed in America. The United Brethren was another such denomination, influenced by the Methodists along with the German sectarians such as Mennonites and Dunkers. The United Brethren in Christ was first conceived in 1768 by Rev. William Otterbein (a German Reformed minister) and Martin Boehme (a Mennonite pastor). These men envisioned an evangelical, voluntary church based on ritual and learning. This new denomination was especially interested in uniting the evangelical nature of most German Reformed in America with the religious beliefs of the Mennonite Church; namely, pacifism, excommunication, and adult baptism. Because they understood themselves as a Christian brotherhood in America, they saw themselves

not as Christians and thus citizens, but Christians and citizens. They desired to participate in government while worshipping freely, and they expected that the state of New Jersey would make exceptions for their religious beliefs. New Jersey was willing to give the United Brethren access to the right of affirmation because they had already established that the ritual was not as important as the religious solemnity behind the oath statement.

In 1785, a strange article was published in the *New York Journal*. The article was a copy of the Constitution of New Jersey—reprinted in this particular paper along with the other state constitutions. Those who took the time to read New Jersey’s constitution would note one striking difference from all other constitutions. In particular, this paper recorded the oath of office as “I, A.B., do solemnly declare...” rather than swear or affirm as the oath of office usually read. This wording had been in place for almost a decade, without anyone remarking that it was no true oath, but undeniably it is missing the key phrase from all other oaths. In fact, the laws passed in New Jersey after the establishment of the Constitution all require the oath-taker to swear or affirm. What are we to make of such a choice? This wording could have been a mere mistake, a blip on the historical record, but the obvious ritual in both word and action of early modern oaths argues against this belief. Perhaps this wording was deliberate, an attempt to make the oath more palatable to those with religious scruples; here to, however, the proceeding decade seems to suggest that those citizens still had concerns over the oath as the petitions of the United Brethren shows. What is more likely is that New Jersey, with its geographically and religiously divided citizenry, looked at the “solemn declaration” as

the epitome of religious liberty. Tradition had firmly established the religious obligation of an oath, what need was there to reinforce it in the oath of office?

Perhaps more than any other state, New Jersey reflected the secular approach to oaths that would characterize the constitution. With no history of church establishment in the colony and a heterogeneous collection of religious beliefs represented by its citizens, New Jersey had good reason to open the oath of office to as many citizens as possible. When presented with a true religious scruple, the state quickly made legislative changes to allow varying oath rituals and affirmations. Governor Livingston, in particular, set forth a vision of religious freedom which continued to stress the sacred nature of an oath, but which allowed citizens the freedom to choose how that oath was formalized.

South Carolina's Moderate Establishment

Unlike New Jersey and Pennsylvania, South Carolina had both an established Anglican church and a citizenry with close ties to England. The colony was also incredibly reliant on trade with the Empire which made associations and boycotts a hard sell. Charleston merchants and plantation owners were connected to England in a very real way. Yet, even here, by the close of 1774 it became increasingly clear that colonists were ready and willing to inspect their allegiance to the King and consider changing their allegiances.

Even under the associations, South Carolina's Provincial Congress and committee of safety stressed the importance of the sacred bonds of oaths. The Provincial Congress had as a body signed the association in June of 1775. They signed the document immediately after joining together in prayer on a Sunday session of the legislature and, most significantly, on the King's birthday. There was, in this act, a certain sense of

respect towards the act of signing the association and placing in question their relationship with the King.

Shortly after the congress signed the association, they discussed imposing the association on inhabitants of the state. As war encroached upon the colonies and their governing bodies turned against the British governors, Henry Laurens gave an impassioned speech to the assembled Provincial Congress. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I have taken and repeatedly taken the Oath of Allegiance to King George III...By Covenanting in this Paper [the Association] ‘to go forth, to bear arms and to repel force by force’ I mean to act in terms of my oath of allegiance...”⁸⁸ Laurens was adamant that he was not an oath breaker. In his actions with this quasi-legal congress he was upholding his rights as an Englishman. By arguing that his political actions were justifiable under the British oath of allegiance, Laurens framed the patriot cause as politically necessary and divinely sanctioned.

Yet, Laurens was also determined to protect the religious scruples of his fellow countrymen. While he felt no compunction about the oath required by the articles of association, he argued that because “there may be among us some Quakers or men of Quaker principles on the lawfulness of going to war,”⁸⁹ the Association should not require men to subscribe under the threat of eternal or worldly punishment. Such an oath, according to this logic, could not truly bind men to the Revolutionary cause and could perhaps encourage those with religious scruples to support the British.

⁸⁸ Henry Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, Vol. 12 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 174 Letter to John Laurens Charleston June 8th 1775.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 175.

Laurens knew the European history of political oaths and religious tests. He “hate[d] all Dogmatic and Arbitrary dictates over Men’s consciences.”⁹⁰ Turning to the Book of Common Prayer, from which the congress had just prayed, he observed that the book contained such tests, which he styled Athanasian, by requiring men to observe insignificant theological beliefs.⁹¹ This manner of securing men’s hearts and loyalties seemed incongruous to the spirit of the colonies to Laurens, and so he argued against restrictive oaths clauses throughout the Revolution. His argument rested on the idea that if the new state, and eventually federal, government prevented scrupulous men from participating in public office because they would not ascribe an oath or renege on an oath of allegiance, “upon that foundation Deists erected their batteries, Luke warm Christians pleaded for their indifference, how said such men can a Religion which contains such unmerciful Doctrines be true, or acceptable to Mankind? Honest minded Men of narrow and fervorous Zeal for the same religion abandoned and detested that Church which maintained such intolerant damnatory tests, as essential to Salvation.”⁹² Test oaths, Laurens argued, paved the way for Deism to take hold within a government and instead of making a nation more Christian, forced pious citizens from the public sphere.

It was at this point that Laurens had intended on comparing the Athanasian Creed to the current oath of association which declared those who would not sign “inimical.”

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 176. The Athanasian creed is a statement of beliefs from approximately the 6th century A.D. which details not only what Christians believe, but also decrees that those who do not agree with the creed will suffer in eternal hell. This creed was frequently used in the *Book of Common Prayer* and was often used by Puritans and other dissenters as an example of the Anglican Church’s close-mindedness.

⁹² Ibid, 176.

This wording, and the political and physical implications it presented such as imprisonment, fines, and expulsion from the colony, struck Laurens as a religious test of epic proportions. He was prevented from making this comparison, however, by William Tennent who tried to end the chairman's speech, presumably because he was staunchly on the patriot side and did not want a powerful man to sway anyone away from signing the association. Tennent forced his way to the floor and attempted to silence Laurens by moving the debate to a new topic. In response to this interruption, Laurens shouted,

I will speak! I will be heard or I will be the first Man who will refuse to sign your Paper! I speak not merely as Your President, I speak as a Member as a Freeman, if I am not heard as a Man, I will not sign as your President, the utmost of your resentment will be to take my Life, take it and deprive me of a very few Years, I will not hold a Life upon dishonorable terms, I will not be forced to sign any Paper contrary to the dictates of my Conscience to save my Life.

The conclusion of this fiery outburst was Laurens' commitment to follow his conscience which highlights the sacred obligation of an oath; to take the oath without being convicted of its truth would put Laurens' soul in danger.⁹³ On a practical level, Laurens threatens to derail the Provincial Congress because without the president's signature, the Congress would look foolish. Laurens' dramatic assertion called for flexibility and an oath which did not deem conscientious objectors as enemies of the state.

Laurens' speech was not the only time when the idea of the oath as a sacred stumbling block was brought forth. When James Brisbane, one of several Charlestonians

⁹³ This concern for his soul (whether a real fear or a rhetorical device) is also reflected in the paraphrasing of Matthew 16:25, Luke 17:33, Mark 8:35 and other New Testament scriptures which stated that those who try to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for the sake of Jesus will gain eternal life.

who had refused to take an oath of allegiance to the state government, “in a base and dishonorable Manner, explained away the Meaning of the Association, and struck out his Name accordingly” even though he had previously taken an oath to uphold the articles of the association, the committee of safety felt compelled not only to expel him from the colony but to note that “he has not felt himself bound by the Ties of Religion, Honour and Virtue.”⁹⁴ Brisbane and others, who had originally supported American attempts to change British behavior, refused to abjure their allegiance to the King and did not see the original association as a binding oath. Members of the General Assembly, however, saw the association as an oath with all of its sacred ties and refusing to act in accordance with the association was tantamount to a rejection of God’s power. Thus, Brisbane could be condemned as lacking religion, honor and virtue. Without proof of these moral supports, the committee felt the need both to banish him and to make a public example of him in regards to the punishment that would befall oath-breakers.

South Carolina was among the first states to create a new constitution and the document was passed into law on March 26, 1776. They would rework the constitution again in 1778 and in 1790, in part because the original constitution had been put together quickly and without the approval of the state’s citizens. This version of the state’s constitution had almost no commentary on the religious beliefs of government officials, or religion at all. While the constitution did call for the oath of office to be sealed with the phrase, “So help me, God” it did not specify any particular beliefs which officers needed to hold. Nor were voters held to any standard religious belief. The preamble did assert that one of the chief objections the colonists had concerning the British

⁹⁴ “In General Committee,” *South Carolina Gazette*, October 24th 1775.

government was how that body had enacted that Quebec Act, “so as to border on the free Protestant English settlements, with design of using a whole people differing in religious principles from the neighboring colonies, and subject to arbitrary power, as fit instruments to overawe and subdue the colonies,” which arguably demonstrated that South Carolina viewed the thirteen colonies as Protestant in nature and government.⁹⁵ Yet, unlike New Jersey or Pennsylvania, the document did not even specify that government officials hold basic Protestant beliefs.

When the General Assembly reconsidered the constitution in 1778, they made significant changes to the state of religion in the document. First they specified in Section III that the governor, lieutenant governor and privy council must all be Protestants, Next, they turned to the electorate, designating that role to every free white man who “acknowledges the being of a God, and believes in a future state of rewards and punishments....No person shall be eligible to sit in the house of representatives unless he be of the Protestant religion.”⁹⁶ Having established a baseline of Christian belief, the constitution went on to call all oath-takers to close their oath with “So help me, God.” But, the biggest impact on the necessary religious beliefs of the state was contained in section XXXVIII. This section laid out the established church of the state as well as the forms of the oath which the state would accept. This section established the “Christian Protestant” religion as the state church, and while the current Anglican churches in

⁹⁵ South Carolina Constitution of 1776 from Francis Newton Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America Compiled and Edited Under the Act of Congress of June 30, 1906*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3081.

⁹⁶Ibid.

operation would continue to be considered state churches, any group of fifteen adult men who professed Christian Protestantism could also become part of the religious establishment. The only restrictions placed on these churches were that they believe in One eternal God who would mete out justice at a future time, that they worship God publically, consider Christianity the true religion, and finally that “it is lawful and the duty of every man being thereunto called by those that govern, to bear witness to the truth.”⁹⁷ These restrictions matched the language many states used in their test oaths to restrict atheists and other morally corrupt individuals from office. And clearly the Assembly meant for these restrictions to act as a sort of test, because the second piece of this section dealt with the oath ritual. The constitution guaranteed that “every inhabitant of this State, when called to make an appeal to God as a witness to truth, shall be permitted to do it in that way which is most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience.”⁹⁸ By stating in the constitution that the form of the oath was a matter of personal conscience, South Carolina followed Thomas Jefferson’s definition of an oath; it was not the form but the wording of the oath that invoked God and gave an oath its power.

The constitution of 1790 removed much of the language about Christian Protestantism and oaths that had been added by the General Assembly in 1778. The only mention of religious belief that was left in the text was that ministers of the Gospel could not hold political office and that freedom of conscience was to be the law of the state at all times, but that did not indicate that immoral behavior would be tolerated. Gone was

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the assurance of oath taking in both forms, the establishment of Christian Protestantism, the enumeration of beliefs required for church establishment.

Conclusion

When men gathered in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to rearticulate the Articles of Confederation, they brought with them experiences of making the state constitutions. New Jersey's William Livingston brought with him his belief that a state church or religious test would restrict men's souls unjustly, Ben Franklin and the Pennsylvania delegation understood how politics and religious belief could charge an issue such as the oath of office and create a dangerous conflagration of party politics, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and the other delegates from South Carolina had seen how an established church, even one as weak as the South Carolina Anglican Church, could affect the political process and in turn how politics could unravel the church. These experiences would predispose the delegates to consider new and radical changes to the traditional oaths of office, allegiance, and witness testimony which the colonists had brought with them from England, but did not prevent those same men from wanting to perpetuate some requirement of religious belief for federal office holding.

Nor were men in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and South Carolina alone in their concern for preserving the religious obligation inherent in oaths which in turn protected the government from immoral and irreligious men. Virginia's scrupulous sects had been left without any way to participate in the government because, like New Jersey, the English oath ceremony was the only legal way for a citizen to swear. And so, in 1779, Thomas Jefferson had proposed a bill in Virginia's assembly that would allow citizens the freedom to practice whichever oath ceremony they preferred, so long as they

observed some ceremony, be it kneeling and swearing, or raising a hand and declaring. The “Bill permitting those who will not take oaths to be otherwise qualified” was one of Jefferson’s last actions in Virginia’s House before he was elected governor. What is particularly striking about this law is that Jefferson separated the wording of the oath, the “I solemnly swear” from the form of the oath. So long as a man knelt, kissed the gospels, raised his hand towards heaven, or otherwise acknowledged God’s witness, Jefferson saw the oath as a solemnized event. This view on the oath ritual would not be fully adopted by the nation for decades, but it underscored the growing separation between the ritual manner of taking the oath and the religious bond inherent in an oath that bound the oath taker to his promise.

George Washington, as well, found fault with the states concerning oaths. His concern, however, was vastly different from Jefferson’s insistence that any ceremony would function to solemnize an oath; Washington thought that the states did not call for, enforce, and insist upon oaths enough to prevent citizens from changing their allegiances. In a letter to John Hancock in 1777, Washington expressed his concern about the lack of allegiance oaths in the states, bemoaning that “From the first institution of civil Government, it has been the national policy of every precedent State to endeavour to engage its Members to the discharge of their public duty by the obligation of some Oath; its force and happy influence has been felt in too many instances to need any Arguments to support the Policy, or prove its utility.” Yet, he felt, “the States have been too negligent in this particular and [I] am more fully convinced of it from the Effect Genl Howe’s

excursion has produced in New Jersey.”⁹⁹ Washington saw oaths of all kinds, as a sort of social glue; they bound citizen to state and forced even those who might put their own interests first to attend to their public duty with honor. As he watched many supposed patriots in New Jersey take fresh oaths of allegiance to the king in order to have the protection of General Howe, Washington saw not wartime pragmatism, but morally deficient men.

Washington continued to preach the importance of oaths to the president of the Continental Congress noting that “An oath is the only substitute that can be adopted to supply the defect of principle.”¹⁰⁰ He did not necessarily blame those in New Jersey who took the British oath either under threat or out of fear for their safety, but since the state had not put in place an oath before Howe’s march, “it furnishes many with Arguments to refuse taking any active part; and further they alledge themselves bound to a neutrality at least.” This neutrality was the price of allowing those without moral scruples to remain within America without a sacred assurance of their loyalty. Even worse, those who were conscientious citizens took these forced oaths seriously and thus, “Many conscientious People who were well-wishers to the Cause had they been bound to the States by an Oath, would have suffered any Punishment rather than have taken the Oath of Allegiance to the King, and are now lost to our Interest, for want of this necessary tie.”¹⁰¹ Washington went on to encourage Congress to instruct each state to enact loyalty oaths

⁹⁹J. Crackle, ed., *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, George Washington to John Hancock February 5, 1777.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

and by 1778, most every state would have taken such steps. Through these oaths, Washington hoped to rally citizens across the country to active participation because the religious nature of the oath would fill these men with virtuous desires and fear of breaking the oath would provide an incentive to act appropriately.

State constitutions and loyalty oaths did indeed provide the new nation with a way to bind newly-minted citizens to state and federal government, but these oaths also stood in the way of pious citizens becoming public participants. As denominations and individuals petitioned state governments for relief from oath forms and test acts, politicians sought to balance expanding good citizenship with preventing immoral men from public office. There was no guarantee that the various state governments would arrive at complete religious freedom in the early years of the American Revolution and many leading politicians feared that opening the government to all men without attention to their religious beliefs would degrade the virtue necessary for democratic rule.

3. “So Help Me God”: The Constitution, Freedom of Conscience and the American Oath Ritual

For the Constitution is de[i]stical in principle, and in all probability the cumposers had no thought of God in all their consultations, eaven the oath that binds the Precedent [President] does not mention his name...--Opinion of a Rockbridge Clergyman, 1789¹⁰²

April 30, 1789 was a momentous occasion for the United States. After a decade of independence, the nation would watch its greatest hero assume the presidency and lead the country into a new era governed by the Constitution. The occasion required ceremony and ritual, but this democratic nation could not turn to early modern coronation rituals as an example of installation because coronation rituals emphasized the divine right of the monarchy and a political theory of power that clashed with democracy. Instead, members of the Constitutional Convention and the first session of Congress needed to create a new ritual which would install the president with dignity and religious piety while reinforcing the idea that the president’s power came from the people and resided not in the person, but in the office. The basis for this new ritual was the English oath of office which colonial officials had been taking in various forms throughout the eighteenth century. Far from being a new rite, the oath of office was considered an anchor to tether public officials to virtue and truth.

¹⁰² John P. Kaminiski, Et. Al. ed., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.) Thomas Wilson to Archibold Stuart, November 4, 1788.

As descriptions of the event crisscrossed the United States, the same words were used over and over; “sublime,” “affecting,” “solemn,” and “august” among others. All of these words stressed that the occasion was filled with religious undertones. According to various dictionaries of the period, sublime indicated something that was lofty, high in style and sentiment, exalted, and full of joy. Newspapers used the word sublime to describe sermons, July Fourth speeches, supernatural occurrences, and natural events such as the aurora borealis. In other words, the term signified an event of both human and divine importance; a moment on earth that revealed God’s presence. This reverence makes sense on a religious level; oaths were speech acts which invited God to act as a witness on earth with the guarantee that he would judge whether the promise had been kept at the judgment day. But, on more basic level, these persistent expressions of religious meaning in this political act are surprising. Washington was not required to invoke God’s name during his oath. There were no religious tests embedded within the oath’s wording. Nor did he have any religious role in this new nation. Yet, Washington knelt and kissed the Bible along with attending worship service before the inauguration and invoking God in his inaugural address. Clearly, both Washington and citizens generally recognized an oath as an event of both religious and political importance.

This chapter examines the transformation of oaths in the federal government between the creation of the Continental Congress in 1774 and Washington’s first inauguration. Congress generally ignored the occasional public debates over the religious obligations of the federal government and calls for federal test acts made by citizens and clergy. Once it became clear, however, that there would be a new Constitution and a stronger federal government, both politicians and the public voiced their opinions on how

government officials' religious beliefs should be regulated. A vocal minority of anti-federalists advocated strongly for the inclusion of religious restrictions in federal oaths, while others argued that any oath represented a religious requirement for office holding. No American offered as public opinion that oaths were not religious events or that the federal officials should be devoid of religious belief.

Drawing on their experiences at the state level, delegates to the Constitutional Convention opted not to include test oaths in the Constitution and did not even indicate the form that the inaugural oath should take. Many state ratification conventions wrestled with this lack of religious obligation in the federal Constitution because they feared that without a strict oath, the strong federal government would be open to attack by atheists, Muslims, and Jews. Washington and the congressional committee designated to plan the presidential inauguration knew of these fears and the importance the first inauguration would hold. Rather than create an elaborate ceremony, Washington assuaged the fears of anti-federalists by making God a prominent actor in his oath. Washington's inauguration, then, was a creation of his previous experiences and an attempt to demonstrate the religious devotion of the individual without establishing a religious requirement for the presidential office. In other words, the presidential inauguration of 1789 demonstrated that the ideal citizen, the ideal president would be a faithful, God-fearing, Protestant, but that the office of president would never require that form of faith.

The U.S. Constitution and the Religious Test Ban

The fight over religious clauses in the state constitutions was only a prelude to the larger shift away from state-established religion that came with the federal Constitution. The outcome of the Constitutional Convention was a founding document that espoused

no special relationship to Christianity and proposed that American federal officials needed no particular religious beliefs to hold office. For modern Americans, the phrase “no religious test” can seem like an obvious and unimportant clause in the Constitution. For eighteenth-century Americans, however, the no religious test clause was a radical new innovation which changed the direction of America’s system of governance. This new conception of the relationship between religious belief and political activity was the product of fifteen years of discussion at the state level and avoidance of the issue at the federal level.

The Continental Congress had largely avoided religious issues throughout its seventeen-year history. The Articles of Confederation said little about religion except that the states bound themselves together against any religious force (section III) and that the “Great Governor of the World” had led Americans to the creation of the union and of the Articles (Section VIII.) The idea that the nation would band together against attacks from a “religious force” referred to the power of the Catholic Church in continental Europe and thus was a commentary on the power of the Pope which many Americans, especially New England’s Congregationalists, feared. Rhetoric about the possible power of the pope had been an ongoing theme in the 1760s and 1770s with concern over the Quebec Act. The presumed overwhelming power of the pope to influence Catholic theology and action stood in stark contrast to America’s non-existent head of state and weak federal government. The idea that one man could hold both religious and political power over a nation would cause Americans concern for years to come.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ There was also a continual fear that America would lapse into a monarchy. This fear was especially prevalent because Washington was such a beloved figure. One example of how this fear surfaced was during debate in the first session of Congress over how the

The assertion that God had ordained the creation of the American nation pointed towards the theological belief in providence which provided a religious justification for the colonies' rebellion, but the Articles of Confederation made no real claim to the religious position of the American government itself.¹⁰⁴ Matters of religious establishment were left to the states which, as we have seen, dealt with test oaths in a variety of ways. This also meant that by default, atheists, Muslims, and Jews could participate in the Continental Congress and other federal positions which contrasted sharply with the attitude of the colonial governments and most state governments as well. By acknowledging providence but remaining silent on any form of religious establishment, the Articles of Confederation indicated that while America was a Christian nation based on its religious makeup, it was only a confederation of various states who dealt with atheism and religious toleration in their own ways.

Along with the assurance of God's providence for America, Congress called for thanksgiving and fast days throughout the Revolution and often supplied cooperative Indian tribes with bibles and religious treatises. After some debate, Congress also reserved a section of each township in the Northwest Territory for religious use. Yet, they did not hear petitions on religious matters or openly engage in the episcopal debate

president should be addressed. Titles such as "His Excellency" were rejected because they sounded too much like a King. The celebration of Washington's Birthday was equally concerning to some Americans.

¹⁰⁴ The belief that God had ordained America to become a nation was a general sort of providential theology. Providential theology asserts that God has set the world in motion and has planned the outcome in advance. While there are many varieties of providential theology, this notion of America as God's chosen nation is a form of national providence. See, Nicholas Guyatte, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.)

which raged during the 1780s. After the many fears, especially of New Englanders, in the 1760s and 1770s over Anglicanism becoming the established church of all the thirteen colonies, it would have been understandable for Congress to assert that no church could be established at the federal level. No such legislation or resolution was ever proposed, however. The fact that the Congress avoided such debate is especially interesting because such an event had been one of the reasons used to justify rebellion against Great Britain.

The disorder of the 1780s made it apparent that the United States needed clearer boundaries for the national government on a range of issues. As delegates congregated for the Constitutional Convention, they prepared to create guidelines on issues as far flung as international trade and religious establishment. These delegates brought with them the solutions their various states had found for creating some standard of religious belief while not treading on the religious freedom of good, virtuous citizens. These men also brought with them various personal opinions on the role of religion in public life and the importance of religious tolerance. While some delegates may have preferred that issues of religious freedom remain at the state level, most understood that the new federal government would have to at least set out whether officeholders would be required to subscribe to a religious test or be otherwise constrained to a particular set of religious beliefs.

Alexander Hamilton came to the Constitutional Convention having freshly debated the finer points of casuistry in the New York Assembly, when, in January of 1787, an “Act for Regulating Elections” was presented and read on the floor. Hamilton vigorously disagreed with several clauses of this law, particularly those which concerned

the oaths of poll workers and elected officials. On January 23rd, Hamilton argued that poll inspectors, regardless of their oaths not to interfere with elections, could not be expected to remain unpartisan when “inspecting” the votes of illiterate men because, “If he is even an honest man, he will think the public good concerned in promoting a candidate to whom he is attached; and under this impression may see no harm in recommending him to the person offering his vote.”¹⁰⁵ Oaths, Hamilton opined, could be manipulated based on how an oath-taker understood the public good, or an individual’s best interests. This fear, that an oath could be twisted, misunderstood, or misappropriated, echoed the convoluted logic of the casuists who found many ways around state-required oaths of allegiance and religious belief in the early modern world. This logic made it impossible for someone on earth to tell if an oath-taker had in fact kept his oath, because no human could know what the intent of the oath-taker was. That knowledge was restricted to God. In this way, oaths were political tools which both oath-taker and government could use as they saw fit. Hamilton’s concern was that even an oath could not truly keep men from interfering with the voting decisions of illiterate men. An oath was no bar to inappropriate behavior if men saw the action as upholding the good of the public.

The discussion continued on the 24th, but moved from the oath of the inspector to the oath taken by a voter. According to the Act, an inspector could ask a voter to take an oath of both civil and ecclesiastical abjuration. In short, this act required all Catholic voters to abjure their ecclesiastical allegiance to the pope. Rather than declaring any

¹⁰⁵ Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011.) Volume IV: 1787–May 1788, pg. 19.

ecclesiastical abjuration as an infringement of rights, Hamilton argued that requiring such an oath lumped together native-born and foreign-born Catholics. Native born Catholics, he noted, were Americans in culture and substance, and as such, had no ecclesiastical allegiance to abjure. Hamilton argued that a citizen “owes no fealty to any other power upon the earth; nor is it so likely his mind should be led astray by bigotry, or the influence of foreign powers, then why give him occasion to be dissatisfied with you, by bringing forward a test which will not add to his fidelity.”¹⁰⁶ New citizens from foreign countries who presented themselves to vote would have already taken an oath of naturalization which called for them to renounce previous civil allegiances. And Hamilton thought that it was not out of the question to ask them to remember this oath at the polls by requiring another abjuration of foreign civil power. But, to include an ecclesiastical abjuration was an abomination because, “we should be cautious how we carry the principle of requiring and multiplying tests upon our fellow citizens, so far as to practise it to the exclusion and disfranchisement of any. And as a doubt must arise with every member, on the propriety of extending the use of this abjuration oath.”¹⁰⁷ Asking men to continually renounce both civil and ecclesiastical allegiances could, in Hamilton’s estimation, push qualified and well-intentioned citizens away from active political participation because these good citizens might either fear the multiplicity of oaths or that they were putting themselves in a precarious religious position. A few days later, the subject was again debated. In exasperation, Hamilton again stood to speak, this time arguing that this supposed power of the Pope was ludicrous. The journal of the assembly

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, IV: 1787–May 1788, 23

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 24.

notes that, “Mr. Hamilton animadverted on the little influence possessed by the Pope in Europe, spoke of the reformation going forward in the German empire, and of the total independence of the French church. He compared bringing forward oaths of this nature to the vigilance of those who would bring engines to extinguish fire which had many days subsided.”¹⁰⁸ America, Hamilton argued, was more forward-thinking than many European nations because its oaths often lacked religious tests. Such tests were not only useless restrictions which could neither prevent the machinations of religious leaders nor eliminate religious heterodoxy from the nation, but they were also remnants of an earlier and less tolerant time.

While Hamilton had come to question the role of test oaths based on the “multiplication” of oaths at the state level, James Madison had come to question the role of oaths altogether as he mused on the failures of the Articles of Confederation and the possibility of a new governing document for America. In his *Vices of the Political System of the United States*, Madison observed that every assembly in the nation was bound by oath, “the strongest of religious Ties,” yet their behavior proved that “individuals join without remorse in acts, against which their consciences would revolt if proposed to them under the like sanction, separately in their closets.”¹⁰⁹ Madison had come to view oaths with suspicion, because while they were intended to use the power of religious belief and obligation to temper the behavior of government officials, they were often forgotten in fits of religious enthusiasm or personal gain.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹⁰⁹ J.C.A. Stagg, ed., *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2010.) Congressional Series, Volume 9 (9 April 1786–24 May 1787 and supplement 1781–1784), 356.

Madison's background in Virginia also doubtlessly swayed his opinion on oaths. Virginia was very late in admitting people to office or witness testimony that refused to swear an oath on account of religious scruples. In fact, although Thomas Jefferson introduced such a bill in 1779, the act was not passed until 1792 despite Madison's urging in the 1780s. The "Bill permitting those who will not take oaths to be otherwise qualified" was one of Jefferson's last actions in Virginia's House of Delegates before he was elected governor. This bill was put to the floor mere weeks before his "Bill for establishing Religious Liberty" was voted down on June 12, 1779 and seems to have been inspired by the same sentiment regarding the role of religion in matters of the state. The bill was not voted on at the time; in 1785, Madison renewed calls for it to be passed into law, but it was not until the legislature decided to eliminate the multitude of laws concerning oaths of allegiance that Jefferson and Madison's law was put into effect.¹¹⁰

What is particularly striking about this law is that Jefferson separated the wording of the oath, the "I solemnly swear," from the form of the oath. So long as a man knelt, kissed the gospels, or raised his hand, Jefferson saw little issue with changing the oath into a declaration. This view on the oath ritual would not be fully adopted by the nation for decades, but it underscored the growing separation between the ritual manner of taking the oath and the religious bond inherent in an oath that bound the oath taker to his promise.

The opinions of the other members of the convention are harder to decipher. Some members such as William Livingston, the former governor of New Jersey, had

¹¹⁰ Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.) Main Series, Volume 2 (1777–18 June 1779), 638.

been heavily involved in removing religious restrictions from oath clauses at the state level. Others such as Luther Martin of Maryland and George Wythe of Virginia would see the lack of religion in federal oaths of office as proof that this new government was built upon a shaky foundation.

Religion, oaths, and test acts were largely avoided in the Convention's heated debates until late in the summer of 1787. As had been the case in creating the Articles of Confederation, these politicians remained focused on economic and political concerns while shying away from issues of personal religious devotion. On July 23rd, once the group had some sense of what the new federal government would look like and the types of responsibilities it would have, the Committee of the Whole voted unanimously on Article 17 which required both federal and state officials to swear an oath of loyalty to the new Constitution. The Committee of the Whole avoided discussion of exactly what this oath would contain or the manner in which it would be administered even though members of that committee had suggested legislation on that very matter in their state legislatures. This is not entirely surprising because governing documents such as colonial charters and state constitutions rarely was the manner of an oath, or the religious solemnities which accompanied oaths mentioned. Issues regarding oaths were normally dealt with in an ad hoc manner through legislative acts. What is more surprising is that no delegate raised the issue of oath solemnities or religious restrictions during this vote. While most colonies and states required their government officials to support that body's governing documents by oath as a precautionary measure against treason and dictatorship, many delegates had seen the continual petitions, objections, and rebuttals loyalty and test oaths had inspired. By approving a loyalty oath to the Constitution, the

convention was not merely upholding early modern assumptions about the power of oaths in this world and the next, they were also avoiding a political minefield that could have derailed the process of creating a new governing document.

Once the committee's report had been referred to the general Convention, discussion of oaths and religious tests was quickly brought to the table. These decisions were often left to the states, especially since qualifications for electors or officeholders were given over to the various state laws already in existence. On August 20th, however, Charles Pinckney submitted a list of twelve rights which should be adopted by the Convention. Among these rights was that "No religious test, or qualification, shall ever be annexed to any oath of office under the authority of the United States." This right differed from the position of Pinckney's own state of South Carolina which required not only members of the government but also electors to believe in God and in a future system of rewards and punishments. Elected officials were also required to be Protestant.

While Pinckney's bill of rights was sent to the Committee of Detail for review, on August 30th, both the issue of federal affirmations of oaths as well as the no religious test clause were brought to the table. Again, Charles Pinckney submitted that the phrase, "But, no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the authority of the United States." In their consideration of Article 20, the convention voted unanimously to add the ability to affirm the oath of office rather than swear it, a right that individual states almost universally granted to citizens by the late 1780s. It was also moved and seconded to add the no religious test clause to this article which demonstrates that members of the convention viewed the right to affirm and the freedom from test acts as related freedoms. The outcome of the Constitutional

Convention was a constitution that purported not to restrict government officials' religious beliefs. Article VI decreed that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States" which outwardly indicated that the oath of office they were required to take by the same article was in no way a religious act.

After he walked out of the Convention, Luther Martin, the "Federal Bull-dog" opposed to the Constitution, delivered a long and fiery speech to the Maryland Assembly against the Constitution. Luther reportedly stated that

The part of the system...[no test act clause] was adopted by a very great majority of the convention, and without much debate—however, there were some members so *unfashionable* as to think that *a belief of the existence of a Deity*, and of a *state of future rewards and punishments* would be some security for the good conduct of our rulers, and that in a Christian country it would *be at least decent* to hold out some distinction between the professors of Christianity and downright infidelity or paganism.¹¹¹

Unveiling what was supposed to have been kept guarded under a shroud of secrecy, Martin argued that while most delegates agreed that test acts were counter to the liberal persuasion of the new nation, some firmly argued that such oaths upheld civic virtue by demanding at least outward Christian behavior. Martin sets forth a baseline of religious belief far higher than that which the federal government adopted: a stated belief in God, heaven, and hell. Such a religious test would make the presidential oath of office read "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, *that I believe in Almighty God and a future system of rewards and punishments* and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the

¹¹¹ Kaminski, *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*; Luther Martin: Genuine Information XII (Baltimore) *Maryland Gazette*, February 8, 1788

Constitution of the United States.” Several states had oaths which required such beliefs, but interestingly there is a far simpler way of asserting an elected official’s belief in God and in the afterlife; the phrase “So help me, God.” This phrase had long been added or required in English oaths as that country’s way of inviting God to witness the oath and sealing the oath for God’s judgment in the future. Luther Martin and others who called for an explicit test oath or some acknowledgement of God’s witness had not yet embraced the idea that earthly manipulations of oaths did not preclude their religious nature. Implicit in Martin’s speech is the idea that anti-federalists were in favor of protecting the moral purity of the government while the “fashionable” federalists were willing to sacrifice morality for liberality.

Anti-federalists both within the convention and without led the charge against the no religious test clause. A group of Western Anti-federalists proposed a score of changes to the constitution and a declaration of rights that they wished to see in place of the preamble. This group spread their proposed changes amongst the anti-federalists of the mid-Atlantic region and sought to have the document published as a pamphlet. Among the changes they proposed was the replacement of the no religious test clause with a “Religious test to be required for office holding, affirming “a belief in the one only true God, who is the rewarder of the good, and the punishment of the evil.”¹¹² This was not a test designed to constrain office holding to particular Christian sects—there is no requirement of a belief in the trinity, the sacredness of scripture, or recognition of Jesus Christ—but was instead an attempt at finding a common belief that united all Christians

¹¹² Ibid, “The Society of Western Gentlemen Revise the Constitution” (Virginia) *Independent Chronicle*, 30 April, 7 May 1789.

and kept the sacredness of an oath. In conjunction with this establishment of a baseline of religious belief, the men also stressed in their declaration of rights not unlimited freedom from religion but, “That the duty of worshipping Almighty God, of enquiring after, and possessing the truth, according to the dictates of conscience, is equally incumbent on all mankind: That for the more general diffusion of benevolence, hospitality, and undissembled honesty, among all ranks of people, the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession, and worship without preference, shall forever hereafter be allowed within the United States.”¹¹³ This declaration was not freedom of religion as it would come to be understood in the years following the ratification of the constitution. Instead, what these men proposed was a nation with no established church, no requirement of church attendance, but a firm requirement that active citizens profess a belief in God and attend their religious obligations faithfully.

In the ratification conventions, the assemblies of the various states also weighed in on the lack of a religious test in the federal Constitution. Most notorious for questioning the secularity of the new governing document was North Carolina. The delegates slogged through the Constitution section by section, debating the merits of each as if ten other states had not ratified it, and when they reached Article 6, a great debate on the role of religion in the new nation commenced. Henry Abbot opened the debate by noting that “The exclusion of religious tests is by many thought dangerous and impolitic. They suppose that if there be no religious test required, pagans, deists, and Mahometans might obtain offices among us, and that the senators and representatives might all be

¹¹³ Ibid.

pagans.”¹¹⁴ This concern for the future religious beliefs of the nation was not new; it was a repetition of the fears many citizens had when the state’s first formed their own constitutions. Nor was Abbot’s next question about who federal officers should swear to, “since no religious tests are required—Whether they are to swear by Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Proserpine, or Pluto,” even an especially sound question since several states did not require a religious test by this point.¹¹⁵ It is intriguing, however, that he mentioned not Allah or other gods actively worshiped in the eighteenth-century world, but the gods of the Roman republic which Americans both hoped to emulate and feared to follow. These gods were worshipped by the Romans with great piety (a word whose Latin root denotes duty to god, country, and fatherland), yet in the end Romans abandoned these gods to worship their emperors instead. By reminding his fellow delegates of the Roman Republic’s failure, Abbot stressed that without God’s benevolence, America too could put fallible human beings before God and that requiring a religious test would remind citizens and officials alike that God gave power first to the people and the people gave that power to the government.

The debate over religious tests was not a spontaneous display of religious devotion. Anti-federalists had spread pamphlets and letters around the nation in the hopes of stirring up dissent. The lack of religious tests was one objection they presented which was especially concerning to backcountry settlers who were often recent immigrants from countries with religious tests and who feared losing their tenuous grip

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Elliot, James Madison and United States Constitutional Convention, *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution: As Recommended by the General Convention at Philadelphia in 1787 ...*, (J.B. Lippincott, 1881,) 192.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

on social respectability. Despite the political motivations of these pamphlets, they underscored a true fear about the role of religion in America and anti-federalist political leaders played upon these fears to incite anger against the Constitution.

James Iredell, the well-respected politician and future Supreme Court justice, responded patiently, if forlornly, to these arguments that he had not anticipated this article to cause distress since, “Under the color of religious tests, the utmost cruelties have been exercised.”¹¹⁶ Iredell went on to praise the burgeoning proofs that America championed religious liberty, and if he had left his comment merely at affection for all Christian sects, perhaps the debate would have ended. Instead, Iredell pushed further and argued that of course Muslims and pagans could participate in the federal government for, “if you admit the least difference, the door to persecution is opened.”¹¹⁷ Yet, he continued, Americans never would entrust their well-being to a man who did not believe in God, nor could the Pope become president since only Native Americans were eligible for that office (and presumably, no American would ever be able or willing to qualify as Pope.) This belief that the Pope would not and could not move his base of power outside of Europe underscores what Iredell and others believed about the American nation they were creating. The idea that a Catholic American could either become president or Pope was equally laughable to Iredell; the Catholic population was about 1% of the total population, and if any Catholic American wanted to take orders, he would need to travel to Europe for education and ordination.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 193.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 194.

Mr. Abbot responded that this explanation was appreciated, but the question of the manner of the oath still stood. Iredell's answer is enlightening about the manner used for oaths in America. Once, he observed, Christians were only permitted to swear upon the New Testament and Jews upon the Old. In a landmark English case, however, a witness instead raised his right hand towards heaven, and though that mode was considered strange by the jury, had ever since been an acceptable English practice.¹¹⁸ Further, when an "East Indian" had sworn his witness testimony by touching a Hindu priest's foot, English law had been modified to accept any mode of swearing so long as the swearer believed in "a Supreme Being and a future state of rewards and punishments."¹¹⁹ Iredell expanded the meaning of "Supreme Being," which usually indicated the Christian God, to mean any deity which held control over the world, yet he also tried to leaven his argument with the assurance that despite the fact that Muslims, Jews, and deists *could* hold federal office, Americans would never choose leaders whose viewpoint was so contrary to their own. After a few more exchanges, the debate continued and article six was eventually accepted along with the rest of the constitution. While Iredell and Governor Johnston blamed the concern over the article on anti-federalist pamphlets, none of the arguments put forth were new or unexpected. The concern over Muslims and the vague notion that a state church could somehow be established, most likely by the Pope, had haunted America for over a decade. The insistence by Iredell and others, however, that removing religious tests from the

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 196. It is important to note that Iredell argues that this mode was introduced during the 17th century. As I have already demonstrated, this mode was not always considered acceptable in America in the 18th century, but it was clearly a known practice.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 197.

government would better protect the nation and religion was the result of years of debate over how and by what Americans should swear.

Yet, many American citizens still saw the oath of office as a religious test. When South Carolina ratified the Constitution, they explicitly noted that the wording of article VI should be changed to indicate that no *other* religious test would ever be required.¹²⁰ This insertion, small as it was, soothed the fears of many of South Carolina's delegates. On the day that the delegates were to vote on the constitution, a backcountry Presbyterian minister named Francis Cummins rose and called for this minor change to article six. Rev. Cummins assured the convention that after careful consideration he hoped that they would ratify the new constitution since "We are sure we can have and enjoy this one, we are not sure we can ever have a better one...."¹²¹ Cummins was not, however, satisfied that this new constitution adequately acknowledged the religious obligations inherent in an oath. He hastened to assure the convention that he supported religious liberty and thought that any establishment would do a grave disservice to the nation. Oaths, he asserted, were held as a sacred act by all Christian sects and every other religion as well. Thus,

I would not wish to see any language or phrase in a national constitution of government, tending, or in any degree seeming to tend to enervate or expunge the sacredness of an oath....yet, in reality in its [article six's] structure it does do it, and will be considered to intend to do so, and accordingly be plead to say, "an oath at a bar is no more than a political

¹²⁰ South Carolina General Assembly, *Debates which arose in the House of representatives of South-Carolina: on the Constitution framed for the United States*, (A.E. Miller, 1831,) 79.

¹²¹ "Saturday Night Mails (Charleston, S.C.)," *Massachusetts Gazette* (Boston, M.A.), Tuesday June 17, 1788. This speech was also reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Packet* and the *Independent Gazeteer* of Philadelphia

contrivance to bind the honour of a gentleman, scare the hearts of novices, and affix certain temporal penalties, without any appeal to a future or divine bar.”¹²²

To Rev. Cummins, and ostensibly many others, this concealment of the sacred nature of an oath posed grave harm to the nation and its citizens. By asserting that the oath of office was not a religious test, the federal government would allow oaths to become nothing more than an empty political action, a symbol devoid of political or religious power instead of a religio-political barrier to immoral behavior. Cummins saw a simple solution to the problem, however. He asked for one thing, “that is, after the words—BUT NO—insert the word—OTHER—then it will explicitly appear that although America does not arrogate the prerogative of sitting in the throne of God, and lording over the consciences of men; yet, she is careful in her constitution to express herself in such a manner as may not seem, even to the weakest capacity, to weaken the sacred force of an oath legally administered and taken.”¹²³ One word, the minister asserted, would indicate that the federal oath was a religious act which required the belief in a Supreme Being and a future system of rewards and punishments, but which did not place restrictions on men’s mode of worship or theological scruples. What Rev. Cummins and others sought was federal recognition that an oath of any kind was religious and established a baseline of religious belief for American citizens.

South Carolina delegates were not alone in their concern that the constitution did not only allow religious liberty, but rather caused oaths to lose their effectiveness. In the Massachusetts ratification convention, Theophilus Parsons, an ardent advocate of the constitution, felt the need to justify the lack of a religious test in the constitution by

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

arguing that any such test would merely restrict scrupulous men from office and encourage the participation of those men with questionable morals. This belief countered what another delegate called a “very popular” opinion supporting a test oath. According to this delegate, Reverend Shute, a Congregationalist minister, calls for a test oath were so popular because, “the most of men, somehow, are rigidly tenacious of their own sentiments in religion, and disposed to impose them upon others as the standard of truth.”¹²⁴ As if to echo the truth of this point, Colonel Jones, a delegate from Bristol, stated that he believed all officials should believe in God. And that, “however a test may be prostituted in England, yet he thought if our publick men were to be of those who had a good standing in the church, it would be happy for the United States—and that a person could not be a good man without being a good Christian.”¹²⁵ These opinions voiced in the convention were representative of the views of the various towns which had sent with their delegates careful instructions about what they did and did not like about the new governing document. Townsend, Massachusetts sent representative Daniel Ames with explicit directions to raise their concerns about the no religious test oath clause since “we think it necessary that our Civil rulers be professors of the true religion and apparent friends to it...Nor can we on any consideration agree to a Constitution which will admit into governt., Atheists Deists Papists or abettors of any false religion; tho we would not Exclude any Denomination of Protestants who hold the fundamentals of our religion.”¹²⁶ Townsend citizens envisioned a country led by Protestants, for Protestants, and sought to

¹²⁴ Kaminski, *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, Ratification by the States, Volume VI: Massachusetts, No. 3, 1375.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 1376.

¹²⁶ Kaminski, *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, Ratification by the States, Volume V: Massachusetts, No. 2, pg. 1057.

protect that vision through the Constitution because they believed that religious liberty was the right to practice “True religion [which] distinguish’d from Infidelity & Idolatry & heresy, is the foundation of good government, as well as of morality & happiness.”¹²⁷ Fryburg residents noted merely that it “appears highly absurd to propose an Oath or Affirmation to the Officers of Government, of whom no religious test is required.”¹²⁸ Both Townsend and Fryburg citizens had clearly encountered anti-federalists pamphlets outlining the dangers of a government without a religious test. But, just as certainly, they had judged for themselves the needs of the nation. Townsend did not want to exclude any Protestants, who made up the vast majority of the nation, they wanted to permanently bar those who either did not believe in any God or belonged to a religion which denied the truth of Christianity. These Massachusetts townspeople came to the same conclusions as prominent politicians; restrict those who could not offer a belief in God and in heaven and hell.

Similarly in the Connecticut debates on ratification, Governor Huntington pointed out that an oath was every bit as much an appeal to God as a religious test. An oath, he said is “a direct appeal to that God who is the avenger of perjury. Such an appeal to him is a full acknowledgement of his being and providence. An acknowledgement of these truths is all that the gentlemen [those who championed religious tests] contend for.”¹²⁹ In an echo of the arguments made by James Iredell and others, Governor Huntington argued

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 955.

¹²⁹ From the debates on the constitution in Connecticut on Wednesday January 9th reprinted in the *Connecticut Courant*, January 14 1788.

that even without a religious test clause, an oath requires religious belief. Even if the oath-taker does not believe in God, the Almighty will still judge him guilty of perjury. The position put forth by both advocates for the no religious test clause and its detractors was that any oath was a religious test; thus, the federal government was not irreligious or atheistic, but had instead found a religious test to which all in America could ostensibly comply.

In the Virginia convention, Edmund Randolph gave an especially impassioned speech supporting the “no religious test” clause. This avowal of religious liberty was the product of months of letters passed between himself and James Madison. As they wrote to one another about the Massachusetts’ ratification convention, Randolph asked whether Madison thought that by stipulating that no religious tests would be required, citizens might fear that Congress held the power to make religious tests. Madison thought not, he argued that, “it[the no religious test oath clause] can imply at most nothing more than that without that exception a power would have been given to impose an oath involving a religious test as a qualification for office.”¹³⁰ Madison saw this clause as a protection against the encroachment of an established religion, not as an opening for a religious government. Without such a clause, he argued, the power to restrict officeholders according to theological beliefs would have remained.

Satisfied with this answer, during Virginia’s own ratification convention, Randolph stood and assured the delegates that

It has been said, that if the exclusion of the religious test were an exception from the general power of Congress, the power over religion would remain. I inform those who are of this opinion, that no power is

¹³⁰ Kamenski, *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, Ratification by the States, Volume IX: Virginia, No. 2, 731.

given expressly to Congress over religion. The Senators and Representatives, members of the State Legislatures, and Executive and Judicial officers, are bound by oath, or affirmation, to support this Constitution. This only binds them to support it in the exercise of the powers constitutionally given it. The exclusion of religious tests is an exception from this general provision, with respect to oaths, or affirmations.¹³¹

Congress had no power to police, legislate, or otherwise hinder the practice of religion.

What is more, Randolph asserted, the no religious test clause was only intended to protect the religious beliefs of federal officials. Because, he continued, “Although officers, &c. are to swear that they will support this Constitution, yet they are not bound to support one mode of worship, or to adhere to one particular sect. It puts all sects on the same footing. A man of abilities and character, of any sect whatever, may be admitted to any office or public trust under the United States.”¹³² Lest any delegate continue to fear that the new Constitution predisposed the nation to create an established religion, Randolph continued to assert the importance of denominations. He noted that he was,

a friend to a variety of sects, because they keep one another in order. How many different sects are we composed of throughout the United States? How many different sects will be in Congress? We cannot enumerate the sects that may be in Congress.—And there are so many now in the United States, that they will prevent the establishment of any one sect in prejudice to the rest, and will forever oppose all attempts to infringe religious liberty. If such an attempt be made, will not the alarm be sounded throughout America? If Congress be as wicked as we are foretold they will, they would not run the risk of exciting the resentment of all, or most of the religious sects in America.

¹³¹ Ibid, Ratification by the States, Volume IX: Virginia, No. 2, 1101.

¹³² Ibid

Denominations kept a sort of religious balance in the nation and kept an established church from becoming a possibility. Randolph supported the idea that America should have a plurality of religious beliefs, but not that it should be irreligious. The no religious test clause, according to Randolph, was a protection which supported religious liberty not which would hinder American morality.

In the Massachusetts and Connecticut press during the ratification process, religious tests were much discussed. William Williams, a congregational minister, responded to accusations that the lack of religious tests in the new constitution threatened to turn the nation against Christianity. He observed that while he was very satisfied with the constitution, he did wish (like the minister in South Carolina) that article six had read “no other religious test,” thereby acknowledging the sacred nature of any oath. What would have been most pleasing to Williams was that the phrase be left out of the constitution completely and that a firm assertion of the nation’s Christian faith have been added to the preamble. He suggested that the preamble might have begun, “We the people of the United States, in a firm belief of the being and perfection of the one living and true God, the Creator and Supreme Governor of the world, in his universal providence and the authority of his laws: that he will require of all moral agents an account of their conduct...”¹³³ Another editorialists, who styled himself a David, observed that the same concern for a religious test (that it did nothing to keep unscrupulous men from office) could also hold true for an oath but that stopped no government from requiring one. Further, he argued, “We have from the beginning had laws in favor of a learned and able clergy... We have had and still have laws for the due

¹³³ *Connecticut Courant*, March 3 1788.

observance of the Sabbath; and our annual fasts and thanksgivings are...instances of the propriety of our conduct in making frequent and public acknowledgements of our dependence on the Deity.”¹³⁴ “David” places oaths firmly into the category of religio-political ritualized tradition. He acknowledges that they have little earthly power of coercion but argues that they uphold national sentiments and moral beliefs.

While debate over the role of religion in federal oaths continued to swirl around the country, the first Congress quietly took their seat and their oaths. There were no petitions to allow multiple manners of swearing, no objections to religious solemnizations such as “So help me, God.” The men of Congress came from thirteen colonies and a plethora of religious backgrounds. The mere fact that there was no debate over which forms of oath-taking were appropriate demonstrates how far the nation had come in accepting the form of oaths as a personal preference. Some members had to adhere to certain religious restrictions at the state level, but once they arrived in New York as Congressmen, their religious choices (at least those concerning oaths) were no longer at issue.

Washington’s Inauguration and the sacred solemnity of the oath

Congress first took their new oaths in March of 1789, but the larger spectacle came a month later. On Thursday April 30, 1789 thousands of American citizens gathered to see George Washington’s inauguration as president of the United States. The event was momentous for a number of reasons; George Washington was *the* hero of the Revolution, his acceptance of the presidency marked a new beginning for the federal government, and his decorum during the event would become a standard for all

¹³⁴ “Miscellany,” *Massachusetts Gazette*, March 7 1788.

presidents to follow. More than that, however, was the fact that a single man was promising to serve the needs of the entire country which was newly united under the Constitution. While many feared that this was the beginning of an American monarchy, other citizens hailed the presidency as a necessary step in creating a viable republic. Either way, Washington's actions and attitude towards the presidency itself and the oath of office which accompanied it would set precedents for the office in years to come.

As General of America's troops during the Revolution, Washington had often proclaimed the importance of oaths. He recognized that they were important religio-political actions which both reminded wayward citizens of their duty and instilled in those same citizens a sense of gravity and religious awe. In a letter to John Hancock in the winter of 1777, Washington lamented that the American colonies had not been more aggressive in requiring from citizens oaths of loyalty and allegiance. His first reason for wanting such oaths was because it made America more like a European nation and less like a citizen's insurrection. "From the first institution of civil Government," he instructed, "it has been the national policy of every precedent State to endeavour to engage its Members to the discharge of their public duty by the obligation of some Oath..."¹³⁵ Oaths were rituals used by all true governments to encourage "members" to uphold their public duty and as such, "its force and happy influence has been felt in too many instances to need any Arguments to support the Policy, or prove its utility—I have often thought the States have been too negligent in this particular...An oath is the only

¹³⁵ Crackel, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, Revolutionary War Series (16 June 1775–14 January 1779), Volume 8 (6 January 1777–27 March 1777) Letter to John Hancock, February 5th, 1777.

substitute that can be adopted to supply the defect of principle.¹³⁶ Washington's second argument in favor of oaths was that oaths *worked*. They incited moral people to uphold their beliefs and encouraged wayward citizens to live up to the standards of society. And, this maintenance of the public good was well-known and documented.

In America, however, oaths had either been slighted or misused. The Continental Congress had not required American colonials to take an oath of allegiance to the new government, but instead had allowed individual states, committees of correspondence, and other groups to call for associations and subscriptions supporting provincial governments. Because of this disunity, "we lose a considerable Cement to our own Force, and give the Enemy an opportunity to make the first tender of the oath of allegiance to the King. Its baneful influence is but too severely felt at this time." Washington found himself watching as men took fresh oaths of allegiance to England under threat of imprisonment or bodily harm. This oath "furnishes many with Arguments to refuse taking any active part [in the war]; and further they alledge themselves bound to a neutrality at least" because once people took new oaths to the King, many felt they could not openly defy him again. Further, "Many conscientious People who were well-wishers to the Cause had they been bound to the States by an Oath, would have suffered any Punishment rather than have taken the Oath of Allegiance to the King, and are now lost to our Interest, for want of this necessary tie." What Washington wanted was an oath of equal strength as the English oath of allegiance because, "Notwithstanding the Obligation of the Association, they do not conceive it to have the same effect of an Oath. The more united the Inhabitants appear, the greater Difficulty Howe will have in

¹³⁶ Ibid.

reconciling them to regal Government...For these Reasons and many more that might be urged, I should strongly recommend every State to fix upon some Oath or Affirmation of Allegiance to be tendered to all the Inhabitants without exception, and to outlaw those that refuse it.”¹³⁷ Washington closed his letter with a call for national unification through the oath-taking ritual. This old ritual so often used in Europe would, he hoped, allow Americans to become invested in this new nation.

Washington continued to champion a unified national government throughout the 1780s. In 1783, he put forth a circular letter outlining what changes the Continental Congress needed to make in order to be a successful governing body for America. These changes, especially a call for a more powerful federal body, largely foreshadowed the decisions made by the Constitutional Convention. Washington’s circular letter was often reprinted and was eventually attached to the Constitution by many publishers. Through his work as a surveyor and eventually as the commander of the American army, Washington recognized that cooperation and national feeling were necessities for America becoming and remaining an independent nation. Throughout his army career he had upheld the power of the Continental Congress against the individual arguments of the states. Moreover, he had encouraged his men and the general citizenry to think about their loyalty in terms of America rather than their states of origin. Some scholars have gone so far as to see Washington as the champion of the American nation, a sort of national unifier.¹³⁸ After he accepted the presidency, Washington set himself to using his

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Don Higgenbothom, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.)

new position as a unifying force through travel, prayer, and even through the inauguration ritual.

Even before he took office, however, Washington became a convenient figurehead for those who objected to the Constitution to address their concerns. John Armstrong, a former Pennsylvania delegate of the Continental Congress and an occasional correspondent with Washington, felt comfortable enough with the man to express his deepest concern about the new governing document. He had, he said, no desire to enumerate any amendments which should be added, “but beg leave to take notice of a certain defect which I humbly conceive belongs to most of our State Constitutions & to the newly adopted national Constitution also; but must prefix, wch [sic] I do with regret, that of all other alterations or amendments, this supposed defect is according to the present taste of too many men, the least likely to be supplied. The thing I mean is a religious Test or declaration...”¹³⁹ Armstrong, as Luther Martin and others had noted during the ratification debates, observed that although he objected to the no religious test clause, it was unlikely that popular opinion would move to change it. Armstrong, Martin, and others concerned about the lack of a federal religious test saw themselves as out of date, more pious than the average citizen, and unfashionable. It seems unlikely that they were out of style given the many editorials, petitions, and other concerns voiced over oaths in the 1780s, but may have been a correct assessment of the direction the nation was headed. Regardless of his opinion’s popularity, Armstrong

¹³⁹ Crackel, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, Presidential Series (24 September 1788–30 April 1794), Volume 1 (24 September 1788–31 March 1789) From John Armstrong, 27 January 1789.

wanted to see a religious restriction at the national level, because even though “our various Creeds need not be carried to any great length in this matter, but a Solemn acknowledgement of the One living & true God...and shall judge us righteously at the end of this world, is perhaps the least (and perhaps enough) that should be required of those to whom we commit the important trust [of governing]...”¹⁴⁰ Belief in a Supreme Being and a future system of rewards and punishments was the assurance Armstrong was looking for. Madison, Hamilton, Washington and others asserted that this level of religious belief was present in an oath without any religious test and points to the shared understanding many Americans had about what were the requirements for good citizenship.

Armstrong observed that belief in God, heaven and hell “seems at once to correspond to the reverence we owe to the deity, and that security which may reasonably be expected by our fellowmen.”¹⁴¹ An oath with a religious clause which acknowledged God’s sovereignty was a pious action which should not restrict conscientious men from office. And, in an argument that would also be used for the continuance of thanksgiving and fast days, religious clauses such as this were proper because, “If God is the Ruler of the universe, the Author & parent of all order & good Government, it seems highly becoming in constituting a National Government, that notice should be taken of his cognizance, as well as of his patronage in the execution of it...” In other words, God’s providence had created America and gave the American people the power which they now handed over to the federal government. It was only right and fitting that the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

government in turn recognize God's benevolence. Failure to acknowledge this blessing "leaves no favourable aspect of the religion of America, either to posterity or to the nations of the world" because it was, as Washington would say in his first thanksgiving proclamation, "the duty of all nations to acknowledge Almighty God." More alarming for the future of the nation, Armstrong noted was that "the Omission leaves an open door for men of the most licentious principles to possess the first offices in the union"¹⁴² including Deists and Socinians, who he admits could take the oath he suggested anyways. Yet, forcing them to recognize God might yet cause them to repent their irreligious ways and so be a benefit both to themselves and the nation. Washington did not respond to Armstrong's strongly-worded opinion, nor did he call for the inclusion of any religious test in the federal oaths. But, his careful reverence of his own inauguration suggests that he at least agreed with Armstrong on the religious importance of an oath.

Both Washington and Congress saw the importance of the inauguration for establishing the federal government. Providing a national spectacle, celebration, and ritual would allow for the people to join together in supporting this new federal government. For such an event to be successful, however, it would have to invite people to participate rather than give them an opportunity to object. The newly elected House of Representatives appointed a committee to address the manner, time, and place for administering the presidential oath, an act which had the potential to either unite or divide the nation. On April 25 1789, that group reported to the whole body that "the President hath been pleased to signify to them, that any time or place, which both Houses may think proper to appoint, and any manner which shall appear most eligible to them, will be

¹⁴² Ibid.

acceptable to him....”¹⁴³ By not making any specific requests as to the form, place, or time of the ceremony, Washington put the responsibility for the oath firmly in the hands of the elected legislature instead of at the whim of the executive. The decision also allowed for a heterogeneous body of politicians to decide the appropriate manner for federal oath-taking without Washington imposing his Episcopalian religious beliefs on the future of presidential oaths.

Congress was understandably occupied with other matters and the journals of both House and Senate suggest that discussion of the inauguration was a rushed necessity. Oaths had rarely been large spectacles in the colonies; they were not like coronation ceremonies or the installation of a Pope. Yet, even in the little amount of time they devoted to the event, Congress recognized that this inauguration would be different. The joint House and Senate committees first decided that the President should be received by Congress in the Senate chambers, then proceed to the Representatives chambers (because they were larger) to take the oath which would be administered by the state chancellor, Robert Livingston. Upon further discussion, however, the committee decided that neither chamber would allow the public to view the important event and so, on April 27th, moved to hold the inauguration in the outer gallery of the Senate chambers instead. Congress must have already anticipated a crowd would gather for the oath-taking and recognized that citizens saw the event as important and deserving of solemn celebration. In addition to the change in location, the joint committee also added to the religious celebration of the oath by proposing that both the House and the Senate should then accompany the president to St. Paul’s Chapel to attend a worship service conducted

¹⁴³ U.S. *House Journal*, 1st Congress, 1st Session, 25 April 1789.

by the congressional chaplain Rev. Samuel Provost who had just accepted the position. Thus, the day would involve political ceremony with the president being presented to both the House and the Senate, a religio-political ritual in the form of the inaugural oath, and the religious worship service. The committee did, however, remain silent on the exact form of the oath (whether Washington would kneel and kiss the gospel, raise his right hand, or offer other acknowledgement to God) which indicates that they had come to see the form of the oath as a personal preference rather than a political requirement.

By the morning of April 30th, the inaugural ceremony and celebration had been further extended. The churches of New York had held services that morning beseeching God's benevolence on Washington and then a grand procession led the General through town. The procession included members of the American army, state militia, and the local sheriff, followed by the members of the House and Senate, the president, and "other gentlemen of distinction."¹⁴⁴ Behind this parade followed the general citizenry who numbered in the hundreds if not the thousands. This level of parade and fanfare had never been seen for an oath of office in America and indeed more closely resembled a royal coronation than any installation of a government official. Yet, the inclusion of the people and of multiple houses of worship indicated that this event was not the product of an aristocratic culture with an established church. Instead, this country was made of a heterogeneous mixture of individuals who, while jointly asking God's blessing on the nation, would worship in their own modes.

¹⁴⁴ *Freeman's Journal* , May 6 1789

After being presented to the House and the Senate, Washington took the oath of office outside the building in the presence of “an immense concourse of citizens.”¹⁴⁵ Eliza Morton Quincy described the crowd as “so dense, that it seemed as if one might literally walk on the heads of the people” from her vantage point on a nearby rooftop.¹⁴⁶ According to several sources, despite their careful planning for the day, no one had remembered to procure a Bible for the oath to be taken upon. Thus, they were forced to borrow an elaborate Bible from the nearby Masonic lodge. The Bible was placed on a cloth of red velvet awaiting the arrival of Washington and the other dignitaries. This story, a Bible borrowed from a Masonic lodge, seems incongruous with the gravity of the day. The Bible in modern America seems like an immensely important piece of the oath ritual. It was important for eighteenth-century America as well, but the federal government had not yet worked out all the logistics in the new system. This oversight points to the newness of this ritual—justices of the peace routinely carried Bibles for the purpose of swearing oaths, but in this new oath of office, it was unclear who was responsible for providing the religious accoutrements, the oath-taker, the presiding official, or the federal government.

The head of New York’s judicial system and long-time politician R. R. Livingston swore Washington in shortly after noon. When Washington first appeared on the balcony and witnessed the large crowd and the Bible awaiting him, he took a moment to contemplate his undertaking, and the crowd according to Eliza Morton Quincy was “at

¹⁴⁵ “New York, April 25th,” *American Mercury*, May 4th, 1789.

¹⁴⁶ Eliza Susan Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Eliza S.M. Quincy*, (J. Wilson and Son; 1861,) 51.

once hushed in profound silence.”¹⁴⁷ Washington repeated the oath after Livingston and then, as most Anglicans would do, Washington chose to kiss the Gospels upon the conclusion of his oath.¹⁴⁸ Samuel Otis, the secretary of state, held the Bible and raised it to Washington’s lips indicating that the action was not spontaneous but had been planned in advance as Washington’s preferred method of oath-taking. Many of the oaths Washington had taken in his life had included the phrase “So help me God” and indeed, this was also a traditional oath ritual for Anglicans. No extant description of Washington’s inaugural oath, however, confirms that he added this phrase to the oath of office.¹⁴⁹ After he had completed this sacred act, Livingston proclaimed “Long Live George Washington, President of the United States,” thirteen cannons were sounded and all the bells in town rang.¹⁵⁰ Washington then gave his first speech as President, an act that had not been accounted for by the congressional committee and was instead a personal choice by Washington.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 52.

¹⁴⁸ Some descriptions indicate that he knelt and kissed the book, while others indicate that he stood. ‘Extract of a Letter from New York, May 8” *Massachusetts Centinel*, May 23rd, 1789.

¹⁴⁹ Many scholars have inferred much from the fact that no source in the days after the event includes this phrase. Some have concluded that Washington would not change the Constitutional oath in any way, but he clearly knelt and kissed the Gospels, which was not included in Constitution. Others have argued that the whole idea of the president adding such a phrase is merely a nineteenth-century addition to make the Revolutionary generation more religious. However, many oaths, especially in royal colonies, did include this phrase and Washington would have said it many times. Thus, even if he did not use the phrase in his presidential oath, it was not out of character for a Virginia Anglican like Washington.

¹⁵⁰New York Gazette May 5th 1789.

Immediately following the oath ceremony, President Washington began his speech by reminding himself and the audience of the importance of revering God and his role on earth. “In tendering this homage,” Washington intoned, “to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own.” America, Washington asserted, was a Christian nation and the oath he had taken (which included kissing the Gospels) and the speech he gave furthered this assertion. Washington argued that showing his respect to the laws of God and man was necessary and that

It would be peculiarly improper to omit, in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations and whose providential aid can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes; and may enable every instrument employed in its administration to execute with success, the functions allotted to his charge.¹⁵¹

By invoking the language of providence, the new president marked America as a nation blessed by God whose political actions could be aided by the deity and whose form of government could be particularly ennobled as well. Once the speech had concluded, the President and his legislature departed to St. Paul’s Church where they attended divine service together, a tradition that many colonies and the Continental Congress had embraced.

Although the days leading up to Washington’s inauguration had been full of pageantry and patriotic feeling, the oath ceremony captivated Americans in a different way than those grandiose celebrations. As Washington travelled to New York, crowds met him along his route. Once in the city, citizens had planned parades and dinners in the

¹⁵¹ George Washington, *Speech of His Excellency the president of the United States*, (C,R and G Webster; 1789.) Evans, 22212.

future president's honor. The *New York Packet* recorded a song (set to the tune of "God Save the Queen") with which New Yorkers serenaded the future president as he arrived in the city. The citizens were full of "joy and satisfaction" which demonstrated "that patriotism and magnanimity are still held in respect and veneration."¹⁵² The crowds that beheld the president between Philadelphia and New York were often termed "festive" and full of "rapture." By contrast, the events of April 30, 1789 were described as 'sublime,' 'awful,' 'solemn' and 'impressive.' In a letter written shortly after the oath ceremony which was reprinted in the *Massachusetts Centinal*, an observer noted that the oath ceremony was a very common occurrence and not one which typically brought Americans to express emotion. But, "...the devout fervency with which he repeated the oath, and the very reverential manner with which he bowed down and kissed the sacred volume, all these conspired to render it one of the most august and interesting spectacles ever exhibited on this globe."¹⁵³ Citizens throughout the country took this oath as seriously as did the President and the religious implications of that oath were not lost on either party.

Conclusion

George Washington's first inauguration was a spectacle observed by thousands. Although his second inauguration in 1793 was a much more subdued affair, presumably the same oath ritual prevailed. When Adams took office in 1797, the affair was even more restrained; some anti-federalists complained that the president had not even had the

¹⁵² *New York Packet*, April 25th 1789.

¹⁵³ "Extract of a Letter from New York," *Massachusetts Centinal*, May 23rd 1789.

decency to take a carriage to the event.¹⁵⁴ Jefferson's inauguration generated more attention, if only because it was held in Washington. Yet, even when the oath ceremony was treated as a mere formality, citizens arrived to watch the incoming president take his inaugural oath. The newspapers printed descriptions of the day replete with assertions that the president was solemn and subdued and that his attention to the oath demonstrated his respect for the sacred.

Few thought that the oath of office was a religious test by the last decade of the eighteenth century. While many men, especially those in states with religious tests and established churches, occasionally called for the insertion of such a clause at the federal level, no real move was ever made to alter the liberality that the constitution provided. The federal government would ever stand open to the threats of Jews, Muslims, and Deists, to be protected only by the prejudices of the populace. Yet, Americans would assert over and over between 1776 and 1789 that any oath was a religious action and that as such, it held all officeholders to a belief in God and future system of rewards and punishments. These two contrasting understandings of the oath ceremony, one view seeing the oath as purely a political ritual with religious undertones, the other believing that an oath was a religious event, reflect the transformation of the American oath ritual from an early modern religio-political tradition to an American ritual which supported the idea of a nation full of religious, ethnic, and political pluralities that nevertheless held in common a government and a belief in the importance of religion.

This freedom to take an oath or affirmation, to accept the sacred nature of an oath or to merely repeat the words and be held to earthly punishments, was not a foregone

¹⁵⁴ "From the Aurora," *Boston Gazette*, April 3rd 1797.

conclusion when America first separated from Great Britain. Even at the outset of the Constitutional Convention, there was no unanimity of opinion on test oaths. Those who supported the no test act clause did not assert that religion was removed from federal oaths. Many argued that the Constitution did establish a minimum level of religious belief by requiring an oath of office. In fact, in his farewell address Washington mourned that anyone could conceive of a secular oath. After he called religion and morality the indispensable supports of freedom he asked rhetorically, “Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?”¹⁵⁵ This was a belief shared by Adams, Madison, and other members of the founding generation; they did not call for oaths to be secular, they asked that oaths be removed from assertions of theology which would discourage good citizens from participating in the government.

¹⁵⁵ George Washington, *Washington’s Farewell Address*, 1796. Avalon Project, Avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

4. It is the Duty of All Nations; Establishing the Nation through Thanksgivings and Fast Days

We have appointed a continental Fast. Millions will be upon their knees at once before their great Creator, imploring his Forgiveness and Blessing his Smiles on American Councils and Arms...—John Adams to Abigail, June 17th, 1775.

On Thursday, November 26th 1789, Americans came together to celebrate a thanksgiving for the blessings God had bestowed upon them. Newly-elected President Washington called for the celebration which was the first national holiday since the establishment of the Constitution. Upon the advice of Congress, Washington declared that all Americans should celebrate a day of thanksgiving because, “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...”¹⁵⁶ Thanksgiving may have been the ‘duty of all Nations,’ but Americans viewed thanksgiving celebrations as their particular holiday and a national event which brought together a disparate citizenry. The 1789 thanksgiving was celebrated by citizens throughout the country and the newspapers recorded solemn, worshipful behavior from Boston, Massachusetts to Charleston, South Carolina.

President Washington’s thanksgiving celebration was a national event which gave thanks to a Christian God who actively participated in the world. It represented both the continuation of a European tradition and the certainty that American citizens should, and

¹⁵⁶ George Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation*, Oct. 3 1789

would, gather together in Christian worship. Through the celebration of thanksgiving, the federal government recognized God and his important role in the United States without imposing on citizens the theology of a particular Christian denomination. And, in turn, citizens demonstrated that despite the variety of Christian beliefs they held, God and country united them as one people. In 1789, thanksgiving was truly a nationalizing religio-political event.

Washington's thanksgiving celebration was not the first national thanksgiving—both thanksgivings and fast days had been called for by the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Nor were these holidays outgrowths of the New England Puritan tradition; both events were well-established European traditions. Thanksgivings and fast days were a part of most Protestant liturgies at the time and their intent was general enough to be acceptable to almost all Christian denominations. Because most citizens were accustomed to thanksgivings and fast days in both their worship experiences and their cultural traditions, these holidays could act as moments of national religio-political unity, and as state-led, generally Christian, European traditions, thanksgivings and fast days were especially useful to American governments trying to assert their power over American citizens and create a sense of American identity.

For politicians, thanksgivings and fast days provided national unity through a national religious event. With the exception of some Quakers and a handful of smaller sects, all Christian groups generally embraced these holidays. During the Revolution, the cycle of fasting in recognition of humanity's sins and feasting in remembrance of God's blessings was useful for citizens who faced war, disease, death and an uncertain political outcome. Whether these events were proclaimed at the national, state, or local level,

throughout the 1770s and 1780s the image of America as a united nation became particularly important in the thanksgiving and fast day proclamations. These proclamations envisioned a community of Christian citizens appealing to God for the good of the entire nation, whether the celebration was nation-wide or not. While calls for thanksgivings and fast days were generally uncontested during the Revolution and Confederate period, by the 1790s, various citizens had begun to question the propriety of national religious celebrations. Some questioned the motives of the politicians who proclaimed such events, while others questioned the principles behind such religious festivities at all. At the same time, regional differences, political factions, and the rising importance of American religious denominations all contributed to a splintering of opinions on thanksgivings and fast days. President Adams' attempt to call for fast days in 1798 and 1799 contributed to an increasing sense that the national government should not partake in atoning for the sins of individuals and perhaps should not declare that Americans celebrate God's blessing either.

This chapter examines the development of thanksgiving and fast days as national religious events from the first moments of colonial discontent in the 1760s through the Revolution to Washington's model thanksgiving in 1789. In the years before the federal government held distinct and articulated powers, giving thanks and partaking in fast days presented one way to create a national community. From scattered references to the union of the colonies in thanksgiving proclamations during the mid-1770s to the well-publicized and well-attended national thanksgiving in 1789, thanksgivings and fast days became sites of communal participation and occasionally sites of political protest. This chapter argues that as Americans called for and participated in these holidays, they

created an image of America as a nation united in public prayer and humiliation for the good of individual souls and for the continuation of national blessings. Through thanksgiving and fast days, citizens contributed their views of America's blessings and failings and created a religio-political event which encouraged people to associate religious piety with good citizenship.

In particular, this chapter examines legislators' motivations for calling such holidays, how they were called and celebrated, and the political dialogue surrounding such celebrations. Politicians generally used fast days and thanksgivings to develop a particular definition of American identity which merged basic tenets of Christianity, such as the belief that God is active on earth and has a particular plan for human civilization, with Americans' civic duties. Good, Christian citizens participated in thanksgiving and fast days both for their spiritual well-being and out of love of their country; conversely, those who did not celebrate these American holidays were neither good citizens nor religious and thus were doubly unwelcome in the new nation.

Americans typically associate thanksgiving celebrations with the early Puritan settlers in New England because our modern thanksgiving celebration commemorates their arrival in the new world. However, neither thanksgiving nor fast days were Puritan creations, nor were eighteenth-century celebrations meant as echoes of Puritan events. As Chapter 1 discussed, thanksgivings and fast days were traditional aspects of early modern life which colonists also transplanted to the new world. These celebrations occurred throughout the westernized world, including the American and Caribbean

colonies, Australia, India and elsewhere.¹⁵⁷ Days of thanksgiving, especially in northern European Protestant nation-states, were intended to unite public religious practice with national identity to create a holiday which celebrated the God-given blessings of the state. Fast days as well were powerful moments of early modern providential nationalism; a fast day had the ability to set a nation-state back on a morally upright path after having allowed individual sins to push it towards immorality. Even as days of thanksgiving and fasting were an important part of the early modern ritual tradition, they were also useful tools for uniting citizens through a public event with both political and religious ramifications.

American colonies generally participated in empire-wide thanksgiving and colony-wide thanksgivings and fast days without debate during the colonial period. Upon the passage of the Stamp Act among other events, however, colonists seized upon thanksgiving and fast days as one way of marking their dissatisfaction with the imperial government. As colonists rebelled against the Stamp Act, they faced the incipient problems of a secular authority calling for a religious obligation. The General Assembly of Connecticut asked for, and received, a public fast in consequence of the enactment of the Stamp Act on December 18th 1765. The fast day proclamation ordered by Governor Thomas Fitch diplomatically avoided any reference to the Stamp Act itself, instead referring only to the “melancholy state of affairs” suffered by the colony and the deep desire by the General Assembly to have a day of religious humiliation and prayer to make

¹⁵⁷ For examples of the thanksgiving tradition in other British colonies see: Robert Gribben and Uniting Church in Australia, *Uniting in Thanksgiving: The Great Prayers of Thanksgiving of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Northcote Vic.: Uniting Academic Press, 2008). In Canada, A Doerksen, *The History of Thanksgiving* (Winnipeg Man.: Manitoba Historical Society, 1975).

amends to God in consequence of these affairs.¹⁵⁸ Fitch himself was in a particularly awkward position in relation to the Stamp Act as both an agent of the crown and a native colonist. As previously mentioned, Fitch avoided taking the oath to uphold the Stamp Act until just two days before the Act became law—an action he finally took on November 23rd 1765. On the day the law went into effect, November 25th, Governor Fitch also signed the proclamation for the fast day, making clear that although he had sworn to uphold the law, he did not agree with its existence.

When the act was repealed in 1766, the British American colonies were almost unanimous in their thanksgiving celebrations for the important political occasion. Under pressure from the General Assemblies, the Governors proclaimed days of thanksgiving in the middle of the summer months in honor of the repeal and clergymen produced a spate of sermons for the occasion, many of which were eventually published. Even New Hampshire, which had called for its annual fast on May 21 instead held a day of public celebration and feasting to mark the occasion. These thanksgivings to celebrate the Stamp Act's repeal were not necessarily moments of deep religious zeal. The *South Carolina and America General Gazette* reported that in Boston the celebration began with the sound of church bells and “Before two o'clock [in the morning] musick was heard in the streets, the drums beat, and guns fired.” This nighttime celebration continued well into the day and lasted until “in the evening the town was universally illuminated, and shone like day: fireworks of all kinds were everywhere played off; especially on the common, where were exhibited the finest that were ever seen in New

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Fitch, *A proclamation for a day of public fasting and prayer*, 1765. Early American Imprints.

England.”¹⁵⁹ The pealing of bells, hanging of banners, and fireworks all attested to the gladness colonists felt on the repeal of the unwanted act. Yet, not all the religious connotations of thanksgiving were lost on the celebrants. The *Newport Gazette* reported that the clergy in the town had provided sermons which stressed the duty of loyalty to civil authority, the goodness of God to rescue the colonists from “impending ruin” and the importance of thanking God for such blessings.¹⁶⁰ A mixture of faith and fun, these thanksgiving celebrations were not merely outpourings of political joy, but were filled with the assurance that God had pushed the British government to be merciful to His chosen people. Americans of every colony could celebrate that they lay in God’s good graces.

Tension rose over thanksgiving celebrations in the colonies again in 1771 shortly after the Boston Massacre. Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson called for an annual day of thanksgiving in part for “the continuance of our civil and religious privileges”; a phrase which was very similar to many earlier thanksgiving proclamations which called for the continuation of various public rights and privileges and especially the blessings of the English system of governance.¹⁶¹ Such phrasing in this particular thanksgiving proclamation did not sit well with the clergy and laity of the colony and many roundly ignored the holiday on account of the recent actions of the British army. Clergy refused to read the proclamation from the pulpit as was traditional and actively

¹⁵⁹ “Boston, May 22nd,” *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, (Charleston) August 1, 1766.

¹⁶⁰ “Newport, June 1st,” *Newport Gazette*, (Ri.) June 23rd to June 30th 1766.

¹⁶¹ Massachusetts-Bay [sic]. By the governor. A proclamation for a publick thanksgiving. ... Thursday the twenty-first day of November next ... Given at the Council chamber in Boston, the twenty-third day of October, 1771 ... Evans Early American Imprints.

encouraged their flocks to ignore the celebration. Other ministers merely omitted the offending clauses as if to assert that they better understood the blessings of the colony than the Governor himself.¹⁶² In a particularly gossipy piece in the *Essex Gazette*, the thanksgiving was called a “solemn mockery” for attempting to claim that civil and religious privileges had continued in the colony. Furthermore, specific churches and clergymen were called out for their participation in the ritual of reading the proclamation from the pulpit. In particular, an assistant minister at the Old South Meeting House read the proclamation from the pulpit a week before the usual announcement would occur, the week of the thanksgiving itself, much to the dismay of many of the congregants.¹⁶³

Again the role of thanksgiving as a dual civic and religious duty became a matter of public debate during Massachusetts’ 1771 thanksgiving. When the ministers refused to read the proclamations or chose to ignore certain phrases of the document, they often cited their consciences as the source of their refusal. One minister reportedly would not “offer up such an insult to the Diety” on account of his conscience.¹⁶⁴ Another clergyman who could not “conscientiously” read the proclamation from the pulpit instead proclaimed from that authoritative space that his congregants should come together to give thanks for “the mercies which we REALLY enjoy....not forgetting at the same time to bewail the loss of those Privileges which we are deprived by other men.”¹⁶⁵ Some colonists lamented this attempt to “excite the Passions and create further Prejudice in the

¹⁶² *Massachusetts Spy*, November 7th, 1771.

¹⁶³ *Essex Gazette*, November 5th through November 12th 1771.

¹⁶⁴ *Massachusetts Spy*, November 7th, 1771.

¹⁶⁵ *Massachusetts Spy*, November 22nd, 1771.

Minds of the honest but inattentive multitude” and argued that the proclamation was so traditional that those who refused to participate were betraying God’s particular providence for the colony.¹⁶⁶ The author of this particular letter to the editor of the *Massachusetts Spy* further argued that regardless of the tragedies of the year, the blessings of God *had* continued and, as was traditional, the blessings of the British constitution and monarchy had to be recognized. Thus, by refusing to read the thanksgiving proclamation to the people of Boston, clergymen were ignoring the dictates of conscience in order to play political games.

The two decades before the Revolution saw thanksgiving and fast day proclamations increasingly enforced by the civil authorities rather than religious figures. As these days became more and more expected and regimented throughout the British American colonies, they also became moments when the colonists could demonstrate their displeasure with the government and their particular vision of proper civil and religious privileges. As tensions rose in the 1770s, thanksgivings and fast days became even more politically charged than they had been during the Stamp Act crisis. Before the Declaration of Independence, before the Continental Congress had assembled, many British colonists joined together in fasting and prayer because of the closing of Boston’s port. This act demonstrated the solidarity of these colonies in opposing British colonial policy and also represented that these colonists were united not only through their dissatisfaction with Britain but through religious belief and action as well. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses “deem[ed] it highly necessary that the said 1st of June be set apart by the members of this house as a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, devoutly to

¹⁶⁶ This was the argument of “Aequitas” in the *Boston News Letter* on November 22nd 1771.

implore the divine interposition for averting the heavy calamity which threatens destruction to our civil rights....” The proclamation continued asking that members of the government also implore God “to give us one heart and one mind, firmly to oppose, by all just and proper means, any threat to American rights....”¹⁶⁷ Rather than simply observe this fast day quietly at home, the House of Burgesses called for all members of the house to assemble and process to the Anglican church where ministers would deliver both the liturgy and a suitable sermon for the occasion. The *Connecticut Courant* reprinted a letter from a Virginia resident which mentioned that the fast day was observed with “uncommon solemnity” and the editor of the paper remarked that these spontaneous fast days demonstrated that the “whole continent seems inspired by one soul” to work together against British tyranny.¹⁶⁸

Philadelphians similarly held a fast on June 1st in honor of Boston. Rather than the solemn celebration being ordered by the government, a “general meeting of all Denominations of Christians” established that a fast day should be called throughout the city. Christopher Marshall noted in his diary that the day was held much like any other fast day;

many of the inhabitants of this city, to express their sympathy and show their concern for their suffering had their shops shut up, their houses kept close from hurry and business; also the ring of bells at Christ Church were muffled and rang a solemn peal at intervals, from morning til night: the colors of the vessels in the harbor were hoisted half-mast high; the several houses of different worship were crowded where divine service was performed, and particular discourses, suitable to the occasion, were preached by F. Allison, Duffield, Sprout, and Blair...¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Williamsburg, Va. May 26” *Pennsylvania Packet*, June 6th 1774.

¹⁶⁸ “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman at Alexandria,” *Connecticut Courant*, June 28th 1774.

Marshall notes that like all fast days, business was not conducted and congregants flocked to the Presbyterian, Anglican and other churches. Moreover, the Christ Church bell, which typically was used for regulating daily life and alerting citizens of the town to fires, incoming ships, and important political news, was muffled as if a great tragedy had befallen the city. In this way, the fast day visibly and audibly reflected how “good” citizens, whose opinion coincided with the leading political parties, felt about the closure of Boston’s port; it was distressing, a tragedy, and worthy of mournful prayer and humiliation.

The committee that had called for a fast day in Philadelphia similarly recommended the action to the city of New York. The issue came to the attention of the committee of 51 who decided that while they could not impose such actions on the citizens, that the clergy of the town could and should make decisions on such religious events.¹⁷⁰ Massachusetts’ citizens recognized that in calling for these fast days, the citizens of other colonies had participated in an extraordinary act of solidarity with Massachusetts. In Beverly, Massachusetts, Joseph Willard invited congregants to remember that “The colonies...are ready to afford all the encouragement and support in their power to this much injured province. From this union and harmony, under God, we are led to expect much. May he grant that this union may be indissoluble...”¹⁷¹ Far more

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Marshall, *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall, 1774-1781* (New York :New York Times, 1969), June 1st, 1774.

¹⁷⁰ “New York, June 6th,” *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, June 6th 1774.

¹⁷¹ Joseph Willard, Thanksgiving sermon, 1774. Joseph Willard Sermon Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.

than just a religious observance or a political action, these fast days in 1774 drew together disparate colonies as if they were one injured entity.

Massachusetts citizens also attempted to have a fast day called in response to the Port Bill and the example of these other colonies, but Governor Gage roundly refused, saying “the request was only to give an opportunity for sedition to be spread from the pulpit.”¹⁷² This response infuriated both ministers and laity alike who called for a day of fasting and prayer on July 14th, 1774. The day was held with all the solemnity of a typical fast day called for by the government; stores were closed, clergy delivered fast day sermons, and afterwards printers published many of these sermons. The printers and clergy alike took care to point out that the day had been “recommended by the late House of Representatives” and was held on account of the political situation in New England.¹⁷³ Individual towns and churches similarly held fast days in recognition of the closing of the port. At the same time the Continental Congress was assembling and colonial governors were facing increasing hostility from colonists, the British American colonies were also banding together through traditional prayer and fasting. These voluntary and spontaneous actions were a prelude of thanksgiving and fast days to come.

Thanksgiving and fast days during the Revolution: Uniting Patriotic Citizens

Beginning in 1775 during the first years of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress routinely called for days of fasting and days of thanksgiving. Few

¹⁷² Love, *The Thanksgiving and Fast Days of New England*, 335.

¹⁷³ See for example, Nathan Fiske, *The Importance of Righteousness to the Happiness, and the Tendency of Oppression to the Misery of a People, Illustrated in two discourses delivered at Brookfield, July 4 [i.e., 14] 1774*, (Boston: Printed by John Kneeland, in Milk-Street., MDCCLXXIV. [1774]) *Early American Imprints*, no. 13278.

other events throughout the Revolution would be as ubiquitous as these days of religious observance. Thanksgiving days were proclaimed yearly from 1777-1783 and fast days were proclaimed from 1775-1782.¹⁷⁴ Through these events, politicians sought to create a sense of American identity and a shared religious culture separate from their shared colonial past. Citizens and politicians also used thanksgiving and fast days as a barometer for patriotic sentiment. Those who did not participate were considered Tories because of their religious objections to such celebrations. Throughout the revolutionary period, Americans came to view their fasts and thanksgivings as the only legitimate celebrations. When Britain called for days of fasting or thanksgiving, Americans openly ridiculed their actions and further co-opted these two religious rituals as the special purview of America.

The 1774 fasts for the closing of the Port of Boston had been ad hoc events organized by congregations rather than by any civil authority. By the fall of that year, however, events had escalated to the point that a “Provincial Congress” had been called in Cambridge which, under the leadership of John Hancock, called for yet another day of fasting and prayer on December 15th. When considering the ritual aspect of these celebrations, it is especially important to note that while Hancock offered up a proclamation much like those that had been delivered in the colonies for over a century, this proclamation contained neither the royal coat of arms nor the traditional closing statement, “God Save the King.” No longer were the colonies acting as subjects of the crown and members of the British Empire; instead, they adapted the fast day ritual in

¹⁷⁴ The fast days in 1776 and 1777 were proclaimed by the Continental Congress but the date was left up to the individual colonies to decide.

order to cultivate God's favor and to encourage colonists to celebrate a religio-political ritual together as Americans rather than as British subjects.

The phrase "God Save the United States of America" or variations on that theme appeared in many thanksgiving proclamations and the intent behind it was clear. British and colonial thanksgiving proclamations had traditionally included the phrase "God Save the King" and asked the empire's subjects to remember the blessings of the crown in their thanksgiving rituals. In this way, thanksgiving proclamations helped to create an image of the British nation as one bound together by God's providence and the monarchy. When the American colonies began to proclaim their independence from the nation, inserting the phrase "God Save the United States of America" was not just a repudiation of the crown, but an assertion that God's providence had bound the colonies together as the United States at Britain's expense. This phrase appeared in proclamations for both national and state thanksgivings. For example, Massachusetts held a state-wide thanksgiving in 1777 as well as celebrating the national event. Both proclamations called on God to save the new nation in a larger font than the proclamation text. Even when the thanksgiving was not a national event, the idea of the nation remained a foremost reason for proclaiming a thanksgiving celebration.¹⁷⁵

During the Revolution, legislators attempted to create a national religious tradition of fasting and feasting by calling for regular days of feasting, generally in the spring, and fasting, generally in the fall. From 1777 to 1782 both thanksgivings and fast days were called every year. During the early modern period thanksgiving days were more numerous than fasts, but during the American Revolution, fast days were called

¹⁷⁵ Colonies across America asked God to save the king; including Massachusetts and South Carolina well into the 1770's.

more regularly than thanksgivings. Fast days provided an opportunity for Americans to express their sadness at breaking with Britain, their patriotism, and their religious devotion to supporting the new nation. Because fast days were solemn, and penitential affairs, the holiday was well-suited to the somber realities of war. The first national fast day was held in 1775 and continued to be called annually through 1782. It is interesting to consider why for this brief period fast days held such relevance for Americans. John Adams comment to Abigail about how the 1775 fast would find “Millions ...upon their knees at once before their great Creator, imploring his Forgiveness and Blessing his Smiles on American Councils and Arms...” points towards the reason that fast days were so regularly observed.¹⁷⁶ Americans sought assurance that their decision to rebel against their King and to fight for independence from that sovereign was not only politically astute, but was ordained by God as well. Most American citizens shared a worldview that stressed God’s role in creating civil authority and that thwarting that authority risked alienating God himself. By humbling themselves through fast days and prayer, the nation hoped to prove that their actions were politically and religiously justified and that God wanted America to be an independent nation.

God’s providence was one of the most frequent reasons cited for fast and thanksgiving celebrations. Although scholars have often associated providential theology with strict Congregationalism, many denominations including Anglicans believed that God had a plan for the world and that he could give blessings to a nation or people if they followed His will and just as easily withdraw His support if they turned away from His guidance. Thus, when the Congregationalist Jonathan Trumbull wrote to the Anglican

¹⁷⁶ John Adams to Abigail, June 17th 1775. *Letters of the Delegates to the Continental Congress, Vol. 1*, pg. 497.

Henry Laurens about the propriety of a thanksgiving day, he could be certain that Laurens would agree with his theological and political points. Thanksgiving, Trumbull noted, “is very acceptable...may all hearts acknowledge “That the Lord Reigneth” and rejoice before him for the Blessings received...” A civic celebration of God’s blessings was an acceptable act according to Trumbull, who seemed to anticipate that Laurens would agree. And, not only were present blessings to be celebrated, but thanksgiving was a time for asking “of those that are further needed, especially of Success, of Establishment, of Peace, and of Prosperity, The foundations of all good free, and happy Gov’t must be laid in religion and Virtue. No other will ever persevere and [be] permanent.”¹⁷⁷ Trumbull argued that thanksgiving days were also necessary because individuals needed to ask God for future national blessings. Such a celebration was not merely tradition, or a political ploy, but was the “foundation” of a functioning and prospering government. Fast days and thanksgivings were called on behalf of a nascent nation in order to court God’s providence. While political motivations were no doubt also present in the minds of congressional delegates and other politicians, their decisions to call for such days were rooted in the early modern belief that God could intercede in the world for His chosen nation.

The Continental Congress understood that, in order for thanksgivings and fast days to draw citizens together, the event needed to be widely known. The consistency with which these days were issued as well as the amount of time given for the preparation of such days insured that as many people as possible would be involved. As had been the case for thanksgiving and fast days called both for individual colonies and for the Empire

¹⁷⁷ Henry Laurens, *Henry Laurens Papers*, Letter from Jonathan Trumbull to H.L. Lebanon, Ct. December 2, 1777 Vol. 12 pgs. 121-122.

at large, these Revolutionary celebrations were announced through written proclamations which were signed by the president of the Continental Congress and distributed to the states up to a month and half before the event. Dispatches were sent from the Congress to the governors of every state making them aware of the proclamation and asking them to make the celebration known. Sometimes governors created their own proclamation in addition to the Congressional wording as Rawlins Lowndes did for South Carolina in 1778. Lowndes added to John Hancock's proclamation a desire "That all the people may, with united hearts, on that day, express a just sense of His unmerited favours, ...for...the continuance of the Union among the United States of America, which by his blessing, will be their future strength and glory."¹⁷⁸ Other governors and assemblies simply relayed the message from the national assembly to citizens through newspapers and word of mouth. This was the method that Massachusetts took in 1778 when they published in the *Independent Ledger* a notice that the state would observe the Congressional thanksgiving. The members of the Council signed their names to the order and closed the brief announcement with the phrase "God Save the United States of America." The importance of the nation was evident in both styles of state proclamations. Lowndes and the Massachusetts council both stressed the blessings of the nation and emphasized that God had called for the union of the colonies.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ *The Gazette of South Carolina*, December 23, 1778.

¹⁷⁹ There were attempts by the Continental Congress to hold thanksgivings in 1774 and 1775, but the states generally did not celebrate this day with any especial gusto. By 1777, however, the Congress sent out proclamations similar to those that colonial governors presented and made sure that every state received notice of the celebration. Thanksgiving Proclamation, *Independent Ledger*, December 12, 1778.

The state and local governments were incredibly fragmented at this time, but that did not stop the myriad committees and assemblies from attempting to enforce these days of prayer. In fact, committees of safety were often particularly forceful in their attempts to make citizens obey the dictates of the Continental Congress, governors, or other authorities. The committee of safety in Wilmington, North Carolina arranged to have two hundred copies of the 1775 Continental fast proclamation printed and sent throughout the colony in order to spread the news of the event. The committee felt “that the humble observance of that day should be warmly inculcated on every inhabitant of this province” and that part of their job as a committee dedicated to rooting out toryism and security threats was to make sure all citizens knew of the religious occasion.¹⁸⁰

A cohesive national celebration of American blessings was not easily accomplished. For all of their perceived power to unite the new nation, national thanksgivings were not the only yearly thanksgiving celebrations held during the Revolutionary period. New England, especially Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire, continued to declare individual yearly thanksgivings ordered by the governor of the state. In 1777, the year of the first thanksgiving proclaimed by the Continental Congress, both Massachusetts and Connecticut held state-wide thanksgivings on the 20th of November, while the Congress’s thanksgiving was on December 18th. These competing thanksgivings raised practical as well as philosophical problems. Since thanksgiving was supposed to be a day of rest from the work of the world, would Massachusetts citizens receive two days in one season without work obligations? Would

¹⁸⁰ Minutes of the Wilmington Committee of Safety, Wilmington (N.C.). Committee of Safety, July 03, 1775 *Colonial Documents of North Carolina* Volume 10, Pages 64-65.

the minister prepare a new thanksgiving sermon? Was one thanksgiving more effective than the other? Both thanksgivings were proclaimed in Massachusetts papers and sermons were printed from both as well.¹⁸¹ As Benjamin Rush pithily remarked to John Adams in 1777, “The good Christians and true Whigs expect a recommendation from Congress for a day of public thanksgiving for our Victories in the North. Let it be the same day for the whole continent.”¹⁸²

In 1783, Connecticut proclaimed the state’s thanksgiving for the 20th of November only to find out that the Continental Congress had issued a thanksgiving for the same day. Governor Trumbull thus, “thought it fit...to postpone the day first appointed by my Proclamation, unto the second Thursday of December next.” Connecticut did not rescind its particular thanksgiving day completely, but simply postponed the celebration which indicates that although they recognized the importance of celebrating the American holiday, the province still saw value in its individual ritual.

New England was not alone in celebrating state-wide thanksgivings, however. Southern states and those in the middle Atlantic also called for thanksgivings to celebrate military victories and other blessed events. North Carolina governor Richard Caswell

¹⁸¹ For example, Connecticut Congregationalist minister David Avery’s thanksgiving sermon, which was later printed, was delivered on the national Thanksgiving Day, December 18th. Samuel Spring, however, delivered his printed thanksgiving sermon on the day of the “public” Massachusetts and Connecticut thanksgiving on Nov. 20th. Daniel Avery, *The Lord is to be praised for the triumphs of his power. A sermon, preached at Greenwich, in Connecticut, on the 18th of December 1777. Being a general thanksgiving through the United American States.* Norwich, Conn.; Greene and Spooner, 1778. And, Samuel Spring, *A sermon delivered at the North Congregational Church in Newbury-Port, on a day of public thanksgiving; November 20th, MDCCLXXVII,* Newburyport, MA; John Mycall, 1778.

¹⁸² C. James Taylor, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.)Papers of John Adams, Volume 5, August 1776–March 1778. Benjamin Rush to John Adams, October 21, 1777.

called for one such thanksgiving in 1777 to mark the defeat of General Burgoyne and the successes of General Gates. Caswell set the thanksgiving on November 28th, only a few short weeks before the Continental Congress' celebration on December 18th. He made no indication that such a celebration was an exceptional event in the life of North Carolinians and took pains to point out that the day should be celebrated because "we may not presumptuously attribute the late signal successes gained over our Enemies to our own Strength, and thereby forget the interposition of Divine Providence in our Behalf, whose assistance we have experienced, and more especially in this Particular, wherein the Goodness of God has been so visibly demonstrated..."¹⁸³ North Carolina's two thanksgiving celebrations echoed South Carolina's two fast day celebrations in 1775. That state held a fast in February and another in July with the rest of the nation. Like in North Carolina, a Southern politician invoked the language of providence to stress the importance of the religious occasion. Secretary of State John Glasgow stated in a circular letter that the fast day was intended "To endeavour to obtain pardon for our past offences and to procure the favor of heaven" so that the Americans might succeed in the war.¹⁸⁴ This language was theologically similar to statements made in thanksgiving and fast day proclamations throughout the nation and underscores why fasting and thanksgiving were such important rituals for the infant country; through such overwhelmingly acceptable religious beliefs, individuals could join together in political and religious celebration. American citizens could aid the nation through their religious piety.

¹⁸³ Richard Caswell, "Proclamation by Richard Caswell concerning a day of thanksgiving", *Colonial Documents of North Carolina* Volume 11, Page 805

¹⁸⁴ J. Glasgow, "Circular letter to the inhabitants of South Carolina" (as printed in the Cape Fear Mercury), *Colonial Documents of North Carolina* Volume 10, Pages 51-60, June 30th 1775.

Fast day proclamations followed a similar course as far as the time given for the news to spread and the care taken to make sure these events were truly national in scope. Because Congressional fast days began in 1775, however, this celebration was held in colonies that had already expelled their colonial governors as well as those where the British representative still remained. In Georgia, after the 1775 fast day was proclaimed by the Continental Congress and was in turn requested by the provincial assembly in Georgia. Eventually, the royal governor agreed to call for a day of fasting and prayer, but the proclamation released in Georgia was significantly different than that announced in other colonies. Where the Congressional fast was held on a Thursday (as would become traditional), the Georgia fast was held on Wednesday as was British custom.¹⁸⁵ And while the Continental Congress called for a fast because of, among other things, the threat Britain had brought against the American colonies, Georgia's provincial congress could only ask for such a day because of "the present alarming State of Affairs, and the Distresses of America..." They could also desire only that "a happy Reconciliation may soon take place between America and the Parent State, and that, under the auspicious Reign of his Majesty and his Descendants, both Countries may remain united, virtuous, free and happy, till Time shall be no more."¹⁸⁶

Even after America had formally separated from Britain, fast days faced challenges from colonial tradition. In Massachusetts, the Provincial Council had approved a day of fasting and prayer in April 1779 but had not yet proclaimed the day in the newspapers. When the Continental Congress's fast day proclamation was published

¹⁸⁵ *The South Carolina Gazette; and Country Journal*, July 25 1775.

¹⁸⁶ *The South Carolina and American General Gazette*, July 21 1775.

in the Boston newspapers, the council decided that “it is rendered needless, to publish and distribute the same [a proclamation for a fast day] in the usual Form.”¹⁸⁷ The Provincial Council found it “needless” to proclaim a state fast day when a national event had been called for, but the fact that there was as yet no set protocol for which level of government should announce these holidays or clear sense of whether state or federal holidays were more important points to the uncertainty about how the new nation should work.

Thanksgiving and fasting were also used to define what was American and what was anti-American. Sometimes, American newspapers would report on the thanksgivings occurring in London in order to demonstrate how morally superior the American celebrations or at least celebrations of American blessings were. In 1775 the *Pennsylvania Packet* reported that a “dissenting” minister outside of London had preached a thanksgiving sermon because of the “victory of the *Saints* over the troops commanded by *General Gage*.”¹⁸⁸ The *Packet* portrayed the conflict as if it was a battle during the English Civil War when dissenting ministers would have viewed Cromwell’s forces as saints. Moreover, the “saints” of the Civil War often called for thanksgiving celebrations—one of the few holidays celebrated during that period. In one short article, this newspaper manages to claim that Americans were inheriting and continuing the English Civil war, that thanksgiving was the realm of good, dissenting, Christians, and that even in England true Christians would celebrate the American cause.

Even on American soil, the only true thanksgiving was that which celebrated patriotic events. When the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* reported on a certain militia

¹⁸⁷ *Boston Gazette*, April 5 1779

¹⁸⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet*, Sept. 25 1775.

captain who had celebrated a thanksgiving with his friends upon the arrival of the British in New Jersey, the tone of the article was decidedly unpleasant. The celebration was not even a *real* thanksgiving but was only thanksgiving “as he termed it.” The paper took evident satisfaction in reporting that the next day “his dear friends and protectors stripped him of all his moveable property, even to his shoes and stockings; and the poor wretch of a Tory was under the necessity of begging from his neighbors something to cover his nakedness.”¹⁸⁹ This sad state of affairs is what came of an un-American thanksgiving; God spited your ill-placed thanks with dishonor and humiliation on earth.

Quakers, Anglicans and Religious Objections to Thanksgiving and Fasting

Politics, however, were not the only reason for avoiding the celebration of thanksgiving and fast days. Nor was it always clear where the line lay between a religious and political objection to such celebrations. Quakers objected to thanksgiving and fast days for the same reasons that they objected to honorific titles, established church services, and other human conventions; they saw them as human inventions rather than the requirements of the Deity. These objections were long-standing and well-known, especially in Pennsylvania, but also in other states with significant Quaker populations. While most localities were willing to overlook Quaker dismissal of thanksgiving and fasting regulations during peace time, during the Revolution this disobedience coupled with Quaker ambivalence for the patriot cause made many people suspicious of the denomination’s loyalties. Other denominations also struggled to participate in these holidays. Anglicans did not object to thanksgivings and fast days, but these churches found themselves in prickly political situations because of their

¹⁸⁹ *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, March 6 1777.

connection with the British government. The Anglican Church was intended to support the English government, its clergy had sworn to do so, and thanksgivings and fast days called by the Continental Congress and local governments interfered with Anglican responsibilities and clerical oaths of allegiance. These objections caused many Americans to question the political loyalty of Anglican clergy and parishioners.

As early as 1774, Quakers were singled out for their thanksgiving and fast day behaviors. Because of their deep roots in early modern tradition, fasts and thanksgivings were not typical sources of contention during the Revolution. Unlike oaths with their theologically charged and endless possible permutations, thanksgivings and fast days were almost unanimously accepted throughout the western world without caveats or ethnic variations. Both Protestants and Catholics celebrated these events and even (or perhaps especially) iconoclastic and Calvinist leaning denominations embraced these holidays because they were free of Roman ritual. In America, the only major exception to this status quo was the Quakers. Well-known for their rejection of worldly rituals such as titles, clothing fashions, and speech expressions, thanksgivings and fast days struck Quakers as human attempts to bend the will of God to their bidding which in the process called for a day of idleness and pleasure. The consequence of this belief was that many Quakers broke the fast and refused to keep thanksgiving as the government had called for. During the Revolution, Quakers who broke the fast or thanksgiving day by opening their shops were often viewed with suspicion of being a loyalist.

As Philadelphia prepared to close their shops and fast in honor of the citizens of Boston, several prominent Quakers sought to prevent accusations of toryism and disloyalty by issuing a statement that fasting and thanksgiving went against their religious

principles. These men stressed that they were “justly sensible of the value of our religious and civil rights and that it is our duty to assert them in a Christian spirit,” but that fasting fell outside the realm of acceptable Quaker behavior. Not only should Quakers not participate in this type of religio-political event, but “if any of our community have countenanced or encouraged this proposal [for a fast] they have manifested great inattention to our religious principles and profession, and acted contrary to the rules of Christian discipline established for the preservation of order and good government among us.”¹⁹⁰ In the charged political atmosphere of Philadelphia in the summer of 1774, some Quakers may have decided that participating in public fast days was not only politically expedient, but was patriotic as well. Others, however, clearly continued to hold fast to their religious principles and refused to participate. By 1775, Pennsylvania citizens saw Quaker non-observance of fast days as a serious problem.

In many ways, the Quaker insistence that no day be considered sacred, especially fast and thanksgiving days, added to a growing sense that much of America was united in religion and politics during the war. Some newspaper articles observed that the holiday was kept with much solemnity and sincerity with only the exception of the Quakers. This theme was echoed in the private writings of pastors and politicians. Although this break with the rest of American society disturbed some politicians, the conclusion that the majority of Americans thoroughly participated in the event was made all the more evident by the perceived bad behavior of a few.

The way in which Quaker fast-breakers were dealt with also demonstrated the view many politicians had on how America should deal with religious and political

¹⁹⁰ *Norfolk Intelligencer*, June 9 1774.

dissent. The *Essex Journal* called Quakers who opened their Massachusetts shops on a thanksgiving day in 1774 “weak and embittered persons” and claimed that when soldiers passing through town saw the shop opened, they entered and attempted to shame the Quakers into more patriotic behavior.¹⁹¹ Because so few people objected to thanksgivings, the religious beliefs that led Quakers to protest these events were often ignored in favor of assuming that the Quakers objected on political grounds. Attending church services and closing your business as if the day were the Sabbath was both a religious and political observance, but the assumption was that those who did not participate were not religiously scrupulous, but politically aberrant.

In some instances, Quakers became a code word for Tories who did not follow Congressional holidays. This same event prompted a Bostonian to write to a friend in Pennsylvania. The men who kept their shops open were certainly *not* Quakers, the letter-writer argued. “I do well know,” the letter read, “that the Friends in this town did not open their shops on said Thanksgiving day; nor have I heard the least unfriendly or uncivil expression uttered by the inhabitants of this town against them, as a people, for many years...”¹⁹² This same thanksgiving prompted Samuel Adams to write home to Massachusetts about the Quakers. Adams tried to assure his readers that Quakers would not disrupt the thanksgiving even if they did not agree with the celebration; only avowed Tories would open their shops on such a day. He noted that “...It is also a misrepresentation that the sect taken notice of for opening their Shops on our late Thanksgiving Day, was that of the People called Quaquers. They were the Disciples of

¹⁹¹ *Essex Journal*, December 21 1774.

¹⁹² “Extracts of a Letter from an Inhabitant of Boston” *Pennsylvania Ledger* February 17 1775.

the late Mr. Dasnerman, who worship God here without the least Molestation according to their own manner, and are in no other light disregarded here but as it is said they are in general avowed Friends of the Ministerial Measures.”¹⁹³ Adams and others tried to draw a distinction between the religious and political objections to thanksgiving, but the difference was not always clear. Massachusetts newspapers assigned blame for the disruption on Quakers and Tories, while Adams asserted that Quakers would not celebrate nor disrupt the holiday; only supporters of England would do that. Because they would not make a public demonstration of their religious patriotism, Quakers and other small sects found their loyalties questioned and their security in jeopardy.

Especially in the southern states, Anglicans also found thanksgiving and fast days tricky political and religious minefields. For Anglicans, fast and thanksgiving days involved a different liturgy than the typical Sabbath experience. In particular, such liturgies often included prayers which listed the blessings or sins of the nation and asked for God’s continued care over the King, the country, and the congregation. Clearly, thanksgiving and fast days called for by the Continental Congress could not contain such declarations of support for England. However, some clergy argued that they were bound by their ordination oaths and by church dictate to include such prayers. Thus, they often kept their churches closed for these events or omitted thanksgiving and fasting prayers altogether. Tensions between loyalist and patriot clergy came to a head in South Carolina when in 1775, the *South Carolina Gazette* observed that on the provincial fast day held in February of that year, St. Michael’s Anglican church was open, but held a typical Sabbath day service where “the usual prayers only were read,” while Mr. Cooper’s

¹⁹³ Samuel Adams to Stephen Collins January 31st 1775, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, pg. 173.

church, St. Phillips Anglican Church, “joined in the Public Worship of the day.”¹⁹⁴

Interestingly, St. Phillip’s rector, Rev. Robert Smith, preached a number of thanksgiving and fast day sermons throughout the Revolution and did not see his participation in these patriot rituals as a problem for his ordinations oaths. The clergy at St. Michael’s, however, invoked their oaths as reasons that thanksgiving and fast day services could not be held in the church.

A similar, but more dramatic, incident occurred in North Carolina during a 1775 fast day celebration. The New Bern Committee of Safety had distributed fast day proclamations for the Continental fast and approached the local Anglican minister, Rev. James Reed, about conducting the fast day service. Much to the committee’s surprise, Rev. Reed refused to preside over such an event because “as he was one of the missionaries of the honorable Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts, he should render himself obnoxious to the Ministry and of course lose his mission.”¹⁹⁵ The Committee of Safety was infuriated. The congregation of the church still assembled on the fast day and celebrated the day themselves, but the day was far from complete without a fast day sermon. The Committee recommended that the vestry then fire the minister. These issues have often been seen as political only; the result of English Anglican ministers who were unwilling to sacrifice their mother-country for their American parishioners. But, these men also faced earthly and heavenly punishments for celebrating thanksgiving and fast days. Few Anglican parishes could (or at least did) support their minister themselves; they relied on the Society for the Propagation of the

¹⁹⁴ “Charlestown” *South Carolina Gazette*, February 20 1775.

¹⁹⁵ Proceedings of the Safety Committee at New Bern, *American Archives*, Vol. 2 pg. 1697. July 21-July 23 1775.

Gospel to pay the reverend's salary. So, while the vestry may have fired Rev. Reed, he could find another parish position. However, if he remained with his North Carolina parish, he had no guarantee of earning a living income. Moreover, he faced the certain punishment of God for breaking his ordination oaths by participating in thanksgivings and fast days for the blessings of the rogue American nation rather than for the English crown.

Thanksgiving and fast days during the Confederation

After the war had been won, cultivating national unity was ostensibly less important. From 1784-1789 there were no national thanksgivings or fast days. In part, this was a reflection of the loose ties between states under the Articles of Confederation. Without a strong central government to organize such events, the states viewed these religious celebrations as their responsibility. Massachusetts and the other states of New England led the way, declaring yearly thanksgiving and fast days as they had throughout the war and during the colonial period as well.

These celebrations retained the national character they had developed in the war, however, emphasizing national blessings and God's special intentions for America. The *Norwich Packet* ran a thanksgiving poem in 1784 celebrating the United States which emphasized the vast territory of the nation. "From Mississippi's gliding stream [sic],/ To Nova Scotia's frozen coast;/ Through all our states join in the theme,/ To praise the glorious Lord of Hosts." The poem was part of a theme of thanksgiving poems and sermons that celebrated national peace. The Massachusetts Centinel published another such poem in 1784 which claimed that "Union 'tis God alone inspires;/ Founded by Heaven the fabric rise;/ Th'astonished world the work admires;/ And owns the counsel of

the skies.” Again, this thanksgiving poem emphasizes the nation and the “union”, even though there was no national thanksgiving celebration. Although there was no national celebration of thanksgiving, the concept of a nation was a constant theme of state thanksgiving celebrations. Americans throughout the nation remembered and celebrated their national blessings through state and individual thanksgiving celebrations and venerated the unity that the Revolution had brought forth.¹⁹⁶

As newspapers and other forms of print proliferated, frequently descriptions of thanksgiving and fast day proclamations and celebrations included a certain amount of state and regional rivalry, which more often served to encourage the idea that these events were staples of American life rather than attempts to fracture American rapport. In reporting Connecticut’s fast day proclamation in 1785, the Massachusetts newspaper the *Columbian Herald* remarked about the phrase “For past offences and others very likely to be committed” that it showed how effective Connecticut’s fast days really were. “Considering the frequent fasts enjoined in our sister state, it would appear that this mode of repentance was not very efficacious, for in the pious preamble to the proclamation, the people are represented as degenerating into the most abandoned depravity.”¹⁹⁷ This assertion that Connecticut fast days were frequent and apparently not very productive could only be taken as ironic since Massachusetts called for just as many fast days with nearly identical wording. Fast days were a part of the fabric of the yearly calendar in both states and the banter about a rival state’s sins little more than a witty line. Another

¹⁹⁶ “A Thanksgiving Song for the United States of America” *Norwich Packet*, January 22 1784. “Address of Praise to the Deity composed to be sung on the late thanksgiving,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 1 1784.

¹⁹⁷ *Columbian Herald*, April 25 1785.

form of regional rivalry was to comment upon the differing culinary habits between north and south. In 1786, a Massachusetts newspaper noted that over two-hundred-thousand pies had been made for the annual Connecticut thanksgiving. The pies were so creamy and of such high quality that if a southerner had stumbled upon the feast, he “would have mistaken them for custards.”¹⁹⁸ The joke here is not that southerners would not understand the thanksgiving tradition, or that they would not celebrate it appropriately, but merely that the South would not, or could not, make such pies. They would enjoy the supposedly inferior custard instead.

As these jests and jabs suggest, the messy reality of state and national authority which ultimately led to the creation of the Constitution was visible in the thanksgiving proclamations of the decade. “God Save the United States” was sometimes replaced with “God Save the Commonwealth” or “God Save the State!” Vermont left out both political entities and merely asked that God save the people. In some proclamations, the idea of the nation was limited to dating the document, but more often the nation was the first blessing mentioned as John Hancock noted in Massachusetts’s 1784 proclamation which stated that the citizens should rejoice “particularly for the great and signal Interpositions of his Providence in behalf of the United States...” While the states asserted their sovereignty during the 1780’s, they did not lose sight of the nation or God’s role in creating it.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ *Massachusetts Gazette*, December 12 1786.

¹⁹⁹ “God Save the Commonwealth” was used by Massachusetts while Vermont and New Hampshire preferred “God Save the State.” Rhode Island continued to ask God to save the United States. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *By His Excellency John Hancock, Esq. ... A proclamation, for a day of thanksgiving. ... Thursday the twenty-fifth day of November next ... Given at the council-chamber, in Boston, the twenty-eighth day of*

It was during the 1780s that denominations began to assume some of the responsibilities for thanksgiving and fast day celebrations. While in New England during the seventeenth century the clergy had often suggested such events, rarely had they taken upon themselves the duty of calling colonists to celebrate the day or regulating when and how the holiday should be celebrated. In the decade before the Constitution, denominations increasingly began to develop organizations that spread outside state bounds and were in some instances more powerful than the fractured national government. So, for example, the Anglican Church held a general conference in Philadelphia in 1785 which included delegates from across the nation. The newly consecrated bishops and active lay leaders made such organization possible and the conference quickly set about creating liturgical standards. Among these standards was the declaration that the first Thursday of November always be held as a day of general thanksgiving for God's blessings and that the 4th of July be held as a thanksgiving specifically for "the inestimable blessings of Religious and Civil Liberty vouchsafed to the United States of America."²⁰⁰

Other denominations also began to develop thanksgiving conventions. In Philadelphia, several denominations banded together to declare thanksgiving celebrations. Baptists similarly declared thanksgivings for churches across several states. Yet, as disjointed as these thanksgiving celebrations seemed to be, they all acknowledged

October ... one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, (Boston: Printed by Adams and Nourse, 1784) Early American Imprints.

²⁰⁰ Episcopal Church of South Carolina, Records of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of South Carolina, 1706-1972, 1785 Convention of the Diocese, SCHS.

as one of the greatest blessings the existence of the American nation and the guarantee of religious and civil liberty.

George Washington's Thanksgiving; A model of a unified America

On Saturday October 3, 1789, President George Washington, acting upon the resolution of the Congress, delivered the first thanksgiving proclamation of the United States of America under the Constitution which declared Thursday, November 26 as a day of thanksgiving. Unlike the thanksgivings proclaimed by the Continental Congress, this address was not an attempt to unify a disparate body of colonists, but instead was recognition of God's blessings upon the young, unified nation. Washington's address was not his own invention; the new Congress debated the merits of a thanksgiving and drew up the wording. These debates centered on the right of the national government to proclaim such days and the role of religion in a secular government. Washington's thanksgiving was widely proclaimed as a success and a reflection of his reverence for both the American government and religion. More than that, the celebration was a confirmation that the past fifteen years of thanksgivings and fast days had achieved their goals: uniting the nation both religiously and politically while continuing to assure God's protection and blessing on the nation. Along with Washington's inauguration, this thanksgiving celebration was a triumph of American national identity and provided an opportunity to demonstrate what it meant to be an American. The administration's choice to celebrate thanksgiving in 1789 and in 1793, but not to celebrate a national fast day also demonstrated what values they hoped America would continue to inculcate.

The Congress initially asked President Washington to proclaim a thanksgiving. The initial impetus for the celebration came from Mr. Elias Boudinot, representative from

New Jersey and former President of the Continental Congress. Boudinot was both a long-time politician and an orthodox Christian. He was a member of the Presbyterian Church which had begun calling for yearly thanksgivings during the 1780s. After his request, the House resolved to form a committee on the national thanksgiving consisting of House representatives Mr. Boudinot, Mr. Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Mr. Peter Silvester of New York as well as Senate members Ralph Izard of South Carolina and William Samuel Johnson of Connecticut. This group was from a variety of states and all were proponents of a strong federal government. Moreover, they were religiously varied; Roger Sherman was a devout Congregationalist, Silvester most likely a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, while Izard and Johnson were Anglicans. With only one Congregationalist on the committee, clearly the decision to call for a day of national thanksgiving was not motivated by Puritan piety. Instead, a group of religiously diverse politicians from across the country recommended a day of thanksgiving in recognition of the Constitution, the new president and the variety of blessings God had granted the nation.²⁰¹

Several other members of Congress objected to a national thanksgiving celebration. Leading the charge was Aedanus Burke and Thomas Tudor Tucker, both of South Carolina. Both were ardently anti-administration and fearful of the new Constitution. They were concerned that a national thanksgiving celebration would “mimic European customs when they made a mockery of thanksgiving” and stressed that it was not a power granted to the President by the Constitution, but should be enacted by

²⁰¹ Boudinot was known as a devout man and he wrote a critique of Thomas Paine’s deism in 1801 which extolled the special providence God had given to America. Elias Boudinot, *The Age of Revelation* (Published by Asbury Dickins; Columbia-house, 1801).

the states who “know best what reason their constituents have to be pleased with the establishment of this Constitution.” This disagreement should not be seen as merely a regional squabble (especially as there was a fellow South Carolinian on the committee), but as a reflection of concerns that the new national government would be too powerful and overstep the bounds of the Constitution. The argument was most definitely not about the validity of thanksgiving, or of its necessity, but about whether the tradition should remain on the state level or become an aspect of national governance.²⁰²

In anticipation of the thanksgiving of 1789, newspapers throughout the country, as they had done during the Revolution, printed the thanksgiving proclamation along with poems, reflections, and letters to the editor about the celebration. Many of these articles described the special blessings God had bestowed upon America. The *Federal Gazette* in Pennsylvania observed that God had enabled Americans to “assert their freedom—to live in the enjoyment of public tranquility and happiness—to establish a wise and efficient government, under which every man may enjoy liberty and safety.” This article also joined many others by contrasting peace in America to the “din of arms...in the old world.”²⁰³ America in many of these newspapers appeared as God’s special nation which, unlike Europe, had not been corrupted by atheism. America’s covenant with God was cited as a powerful motive for thanksgiving and the main reason for America’s success. The nation perceived Washington’s thanksgiving as a celebration of the nation, its accomplishments, and its future.

²⁰² Quoted in Sickel, *Thanksgiving*, 24-25.

²⁰³ *Federal Gazette* (Baltimore, Md.), November 25th, 1789.

Washington's proclamation itself reflected the way in which Americans conceived of their nation and their loyalty to it. Like most previous and future proclamations, Washington began by invoking the tradition of thanksgiving: "Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God," he observed that it was fitting for America to make a national celebration of God's blessing of a strong government. Washington made it clear that thanksgiving was a national event and not a state or local celebration by emphasizing that the day would "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..."²⁰⁴ This celebration of thanksgiving was meaningless without the heartfelt participation of all citizens—while the nation may have been an abstract recipient of God's blessings in the state and local thanksgivings, Washington called on the citizenry as a whole to give thanks for the blessing of the Constitution. Thanksgivings throughout the Revolution had stressed blessings such as health, harvest, and the union of the colonies. The nation had often appeared in the abstract in the proclamations, sermons, and newspaper articles, but the President's thanksgiving solidified what exactly the nation was and how God had blessed it. Washington's thanksgiving emphasized that the federal government itself was the greatest blessing God could bestow on the nation.

Although many citizens were not thankful for the Constitution and the strong national government it created, Washington's proclamation imagined, or perhaps hoped, that even those opposed could find it in their hearts to thank God for the blessings "of his

²⁰⁴ George Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation*, (New York, NY; Childs and Swaine, 1789.)

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 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.” While most citizens would agree with parts of this proclamation, many would question the “blessings” of the Constitution, of the state governments or even of the peacefulness Washington claimed the nation had lately experienced. And the proclamations released by the states reflected the internal tension between federalists and anti-federalists in regards to the new federal government. Massachusetts’s proclamation of the national thanksgiving still asked God to save the commonwealth and New Hampshire the state; Vermont and New Jersey asked only that He save the people; Rhode Island covered both sides of the political coin by asking God to save *both* the state and the nation; New York avoided any such issue as well by only reprinting the president’s proclamation without any addition by the governor. The ambivalence in these proclamations over the role of the federal government reflected the concerns of many Americans. Such objections would continue throughout the early national period as citizens attempted to fit their beliefs into the national spirit and as the imagined nation proved incapable of reflecting the many opinions of its diverse citizens. For that particular moment in 1789, however, God’s divine Providence was generally recognized by America’s citizens and the pulpits supported the nation newly united by the Constitution.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

The newspapers were equally busy after November 26 as they described the thanksgiving celebration—frequently without reference to those who objected to the celebration. The *New York Journal* remarked on the charity collection taken up by the Presbyterian churches.²⁰⁶ The residents of Wilmington Delaware, according to the *Gazette of the United States*, celebrated appropriately by “shutting up their houses, and retiring from all kinds of worldly pursuits, and attending the divine service and thanksgiving.”²⁰⁷ This unanimous suspension of business was also observed in Charleston where the citizens rejoiced in the Almighty and gave obedience to “the precepts of Christianity, as the proper foundation of national prosperity and individual happiness.” While the idea of the nation was important in thanksgiving proclamations, the celebration of thanksgiving with its call for a day of rest, worship and prayer, reinforced another idea of the American nation; that it would be Christian. The accounts of charity collections, shuttered businesses, and Christian feeling assured citizens that not only had they joined the other states through a federal government, but that they had joined with them in Christian feeling as well.²⁰⁸

Sentiments about God’s place in America’s government were common. For many Americans, the thanksgiving proclaimed by George Washington was a comforting sign that religion would remain an important part of the new nation despite the secular nature of the Constitution. In the *New York Packet* in 1789, “Eusebius” requested his essay on

²⁰⁶ *New York Journal* (New York, NY.), November 26 1789.

²⁰⁷ “Wilmington, (Delaware) November 27th” *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia, Pa.), December 12 1789;

²⁰⁸ “Charleston, (S.C.) November 28th” *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), December 11 1789.

fast and thanksgiving days to be printed as a reflection on Pres. Washington's address.

Eusebius remarked on the necessity of Christian feeling in order to experience a true thanksgiving, for "what acceptable thanksgiving can a person offer to God, while a dark suspicion rankles at their heart, that God, after having served the purposes of his providences with him here...may prove an everlasting adversary to him hereafter."

According to Eusebius, a person who doubted his faith or God could not fully participate in the thanksgiving process. The next logical step was that those who questioned God could not be truly patriotic, especially on a day of thanksgiving, because they lacked the religious feeling necessary to thank God for his national blessings. For Eusebius and other devout Christians, the new nation and the "civil liberties" it gave were only possible for true Christians. To be a (good) American was to be a religiously motivated one. Thanksgiving, then, was an important holiday because it reinforced America's debt to God, encouraged sober citizens, and unified good citizens in their religious as well as political pursuits.²⁰⁹

Conclusion

In many ways, Washington's 1789 thanksgiving celebration was the fulfillment of John Adam's vision of millions of Americans joined together in prayer. There were no loyalists cluttering the holiday with political displeasure and all the congregants were also American citizens behaving in a patriotic and religious manner. American identity had not fractured under the pressure of war, weak central government, and economic depression, but had instead flourished into a nation ordained and blessed by God. As one

²⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that Eusebius' penname evokes the orthodox ancient church historian who recorded a careful account of the early church and (as the name called readers to remember) pointed out heresy and lapsed belief in his own time. Eusebius, Letter to the Editor, *New York Packet* (New York), December 5th, 1789.

newspaper article observed after the celebration, “Four Millions of People, paying the most acceptable of Sacrifices, Praise and Adoration! –A duty so rational and so conducive of public felicity that a wise Heathen hath said, ‘The only foundations for national prosperity are PIETY TOWARDS THE GODS, AND JUSTICE AND CHARITY TOWARD MANKIND.’”²¹⁰

Thanksgiving and fast day proclamations were by nature very formulaic, written rituals whose wording conveyed tradition and power. This formula was obvious not only in such conventions as ending the proclamation with “God Save the King,” but also in the wording of the proclamation which most typically began with some acknowledgement of God’s providence on earth and the duty of His people to recognize those blessings. In America, at the federal level of government, these proclamations almost always began with an assertion that it was the duty of a nation to give thanks to God. In the 1778 proclamation the congress declared that it was “the indispensable duty of all men” to acknowledge their blessings.²¹¹ The 1781 document stated that it was the duty of “all ranks” while the 1782 proclamation asserted that it was “the indispensable duty of all Nations.”²¹² President Washington’s 1789 proclamation was no different from these in emphasizing the importance of national religious observance. Washington boldly proclaimed that “Whereas it is the duty of All Nations to Acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God” his nation, newly solidified under the Constitution, should join together in a day of thanksgiving in prayer. This wording is more direct than most Continental

²¹⁰ “Monitor no. 282,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 5 1789.

²¹¹ Continental Congress, “Thanksgiving Proclamation,” 17 November 1778.

²¹² Continental Congress, “Thanksgiving Proclamation,” 26 October 1781; Continental Congress, “Thanksgiving Proclamation,” 11 October 1782.

Congress proclamations by invoking not only the word “providence” but also God’s name, which does not appear in every earlier proclamation.

Through this proclamation, Washington and the members of the first Congress established that the early modern ritual of thanksgiving was central to American identity and a necessary action for a providentially ordained nation to participate in. While fast days had clearly played an important role, especially in mobilizing the colonies to join together in the years before the Revolution, thanksgiving quickly took pride of place once the nation was firmly established. Regardless of which ritual had a longer impact on the nation, both rituals helped to shape and determine what it meant to be an American citizen in the early republic.

5. The Spirit of Party and the Author of Divine Providence in Thanksgiving and Fast Days after 1789

...the safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessing of Almighty God; and the national acknowledgement of this truth is not only an indispensable duty which the People owe to Him, but a duty whose natural influence is favorable to that Morality and Piety, without which social Happiness cannot exist nor the Blessings of a Free Government be enjoyed...John Adams, Fast Day proclamation 1798

They [thanksgiving and fast days] are merely days devoted to politics and give the sentiment for months. They are passed in meeting together, hearing prayers and sermons on themes foreign to gratitude or humiliation...--*Aurora General Advertiser* January 1st, 1799

Americans had overwhelmingly approved of President Washington's 1789 thanksgiving celebration. Praise for the Constitution, the United States, Washington himself, and God's providence rang from politicians, newspapers, and pulpits. Yet, amongst these glad tidings were also calls for an end to America's thanksgiving and fasting traditions because such days were inappropriate in a democracy. In a nation without an established church, some citizens argued, days of thanksgiving and fasting could not unite the nation through a shared religious experience and theological purpose. When these holidays were called for, they often became used as political pawns rather than religious duties. Regional and denominational competitions also arose which undermined the ability of these days to unify the nation. When President John Adams called for a national days of fasting and thanksgiving in 1798 and 1799, he may have

imagined that the celebration would unite the nation and that “Millions will be on their knees at once before their great Creator, imploring his forgiveness and Blessing his smiles on American council and arms” as he had envisioned occurring during the continental fast in 1775.²¹³ Instead, Adams divided the nation along party lines with his proclamation and he reinforced Americans’ differences rather than their similarities by calling for a holiday which went against tradition, popular sentiment and the prevailing notion of the separation between church and state.

This chapter examines the changing role of thanksgiving and fast days in America during the decade between Washington’s 1789 thanksgiving and Adams’ 1799 fast day. A number of factors contributed to these changes: political posturing, changing notions of what it meant to be in a republic, and a new interpretation of providential theology, among them. Both politicians and clergy used thanksgivings and fast days to promote their vision of the nation during this period, but these visions were increasingly contradictory. Citizens differed over whether these celebrations should be the responsibility of the federal, state, or local governments or of various Christian denominations.

By the early 1800s, thanksgiving and fast days had diverged from one another in meaning and popularity and these holidays had become more secular as well as political in their observance. National fast days generally became objects of scorn and were seen as antiquated remnants called by religious fanatics because they used a political tool to place a religious obligation on individual citizens. This trend marked a sharp change from the prominent role of fast days during the revolution and signals a shift in how

²¹³ John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 17 1775. *Letters of the Delegates to the Continental Congress* Vol. 1, pg. 497.

Americans thought about themselves and their destiny. Thanksgiving became more and more associated with its secular activities: feasting, visiting, and dancing. Denominations and local clergy, along with a handful of concerned politicians, attempted to rescue the religious aspects of the holiday by emphasizing how religious observance and political virtue worked together to benefit the nation. Perhaps most devastating to both the thanksgiving and the fast day holiday, however, was the rising sense of regional allegiance which led to the assertion that thanksgiving was a New England tradition rather than an extension of the early modern world celebrated throughout America. As thanksgiving became more closely aligned with the New England region, interest in the holiday as a national event began to wane.

The National Thanksgiving and Fast Days of the 1790s

President Washington called for thanksgivings both in 1789 and in 1795. The 1789 thanksgiving followed the tradition established by the Continental Congress and state governments; it was held in November, the proclamation was spread throughout the country by federal and state political leaders, and the blessings celebrated included both governmental triumphs and the extension of religious liberties. The 1795 event, on the other hand, was held in February, did not come with a Congressional seal of approval, and placed the duty of thanksgiving firmly on the myriad Christian denominations to observe the holiday rather than on all citizens as a part of their civic duty. While some American thanksgivings had been held during the spring, they had all been proclaimed on account of military victories during the revolution. There was no war in 1795, although Washington claimed the blessings of having put down an insurrection (the Whiskey Rebellion) and not being embroiled in European wars. Yet, the Whiskey Rebellion had

fallen apart in the fall of 1794 when there still would have been time for a more typical thanksgiving celebration in November or December. In his 1789 proclamation, Washington was careful to point out that the holiday came at the request of “both houses of Congress” even though he had discussed such a day with James Madison and Alexander Hamilton.²¹⁴ This calculated inclusion of the legislative body was missing from the 1795 proclamation which presented the thanksgiving holiday as a product of Washington’s desires alone. This act of executive autonomy struck many anti-federalists as proof that all individual heads of state would inevitably become monarchs. In one final shift from the 1789 event, Washington called not on citizens’ duty to the nation for their observance of the holiday, but on “all Religious Societies and Denominations” to hold the day sacred. Previous proclamations had relied on the natural and necessary piety of individual citizens to observe the day, but Washington placed this responsibility squarely on the increasingly centralized denominations instead.

Even though fast days had been more consistently celebrated during the Revolution, Washington had not called for a national day of fasting and prayer. So, when President Adams called for fast days in 1798 and 1799, they were the first national fast days in fifteen years. These proclamations differed from previous iterations and the most obvious difference was that Adams mixed the language and theology of thanksgiving with the call for a fast day making the holiday unclear and ripe for ridicule. He also began his proclamation with a defense of the holiday rather than the usual synopsis of the

²¹⁴ As James Madison noted in 1818. There is no reason to doubt, however, that Washington heartily approved of such a festivity—he had routinely applauded such moments of religious piety. James Madison to James Monroe, December 11, 1818. J.C.A. Stagg, *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition*, Retirement Series, Volume 1 (4 March 1817–31 January 1820.)

calamities visited upon the nation which necessitated a day of fasting and prayer. More than a proclamation for a day of fasting and prayer, Adams' offered to American citizens an explanation of why a democracy needed days of thanksgiving and fasting. Adams opened his proclamation with the assertion that

the safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessing of Almighty God; and the national acknowledgement of this truth is not only an indispensable duty which the People owe to Him, but a duty whose natural influence is favorable to that Morality and Piety, without which social Happiness cannot exist nor the Blessings of a Free Government be enjoyed...²¹⁵

This opening was strikingly different from Washington's 1789 thanksgiving proclamation which opened, "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the divine providence of almighty God..."²¹⁶ Both proclamations surmised that a democracy like America could only function with a moral and pious citizenry who championed the nation through prayers and self-sacrifice to God who would, in turn, extend His protection. Washington, however, stated this sentiment as a fact, while Adams laid out the case for fast days like that lawyer he was.

Adams recognized that he could not command participation in his fast day; like Washington before him he eschewed the language of British thanksgiving and fast day proclamations which had the governor "appoint" the holiday and instead merely "recommend[ed]" that citizens observe the fast day as if it were the Sabbath. The language of this proclamation differed greatly also from the Continental Congress' fast day proclamation in 1775 which Adams had so greatly esteemed. The Continental Congress 'recommended' thanksgiving and fast days to the legislatures of the various

²¹⁵ John Adams, "Proclamation for a Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," 1798.

²¹⁶ George Washington, "Thanksgiving Proclamation," October 3 1789.

colonies. These proclamations also invoked both Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost; another aspect of Christianity which neither Washington nor Adams addressed. Adams' 1798 and 1799 fast day proclamations never discussed the sins of either the nation or of individual citizens which may have contributed to the dangers visited upon the country. The fast day proclamations of the Continental Congress asked Americans to beg God's forgiveness for such sins in order that God might lift the nation's burdens, while the later proclamations insinuated only that fasting and prayer might lead politicians and citizens towards better actions in regards to governmental affairs. This change denotes a significant shift in the reason for fast and thanksgiving days. The proclamations put forth by the Continental Congress assumed that God would only deliver his Blessings to the nation if its citizens were properly humbled by their sins and thankful for the bounties which they did not deserve. While Washington's proclamations continued to invoke providence and providential theology to justify his thanksgiving days, Adams did not use this providential theology; instead, these proclamations treated days of thanksgiving and fasting as opportunities for the nation to pray together and change their own attitude towards government rather than changing God's actions on earth.

The Constitutional Limits of Thanksgiving

Proclamations may have set the tone for the observance of thanksgiving and fast days, but once released for public consumption, newspaper editors, clergyman, and laymen alike could shift the focus of these proscribed days. As the previous chapter indicated, Washington's 1789 thanksgiving was widely acclaimed as a satisfactory celebration of the newly united nation and as part of an established American tradition. The Constitution had solidified America as a nation and American citizenship as an

important part of an individual's identity; the thanksgiving was a celebration and confirmation of this newly created federal government. Many individuals saw the Constitution as America's saving grace which rescued the republic from almost certain destruction. The editor of the *Massachusetts Centinel* observed that "No nation under Heaven hath more cause for giving thanks to the Author of every good and every perfect blessing than the United States of America" because only three years before the nation had been "a mere *Sound*" whose "Commerce [was] rapidly annihilating and manufactures nearly extinct." With the ratification of the Constitution, America had now a "Government in complete operation" and "an Administration in whom the people place a confidence hitherto unknown."²¹⁷ Most newspapers and editorialists stressed the blessing of the Constitution as justification for the celebration of a religio-political ritual like thanksgiving and invoked providential theology to demonstrate it.

Even during the celebratory mood created by the ratification of the Constitution and the election of Washington, however, the beginnings of political objections to thanksgivings and fast days appeared. The *Herald of Freedom*, a Boston newspaper which generally supported the federal government, argued that the President had no right to direct the people to do anything; he was in charge of the federal government but the states had the ultimate right to dictate public action. This editorial argued that "had he, therefor, addressed himself to the supreme executive power of the several states and recommended it to them to appoint a thanksgiving upon one particular day, it would have been quite compatible to the high office he holds", but that for Washington to proclaim the day to individual citizens "may lead to the establishment of a precedent to lead to

²¹⁷ "Federal Thanksgiving," *Massachusetts Centinel*, November 25 1789.

matters of greater importance.”²¹⁸ According to this argument, President Washington could not direct individual citizens to do anything; he could only pass on such advice to the states since his abilities were limited to those enumerated in the Constitution. This editorial also questioned the power of the Congress to impose upon the people. The writer noted that the House had requested the president announce a day of thanksgiving but argued that the Constitution had not given that body such a right either. This argument was reprinted in the *New York Journal* with the additional anecdote that the governor of Massachusetts (John Hancock) seemingly agreed that Washington’s proclamation was out of line because he issued his own proclamation “according to ancient usage,” which presumably was meant to remind readers that the individual states had been declaring thanksgiving days since the colonial period.²¹⁹ As we have seen, this practice of attaching a state proclamation to a national one was not new. The practice had occurred during the Revolution as well when the Continental Congress appointed a particular day for thanksgiving and fast days which casts doubt on the assertion that Hancock objected to Washington’s proclamation on a Constitutional basis because of his addition. Whether or not Hancock harbored doubts about the validity of Washington’s thanksgiving, the belief that many anti-federalists shared was that such proclamations overstepped the boundaries of the federal government and were the first step in the recreation of a monarchical or dictatorial rule.

²¹⁸ “For the Herald of Freedom,” *The Herald of Freedom* (Boston), October 16 1789; “For the New York Journal,” *New York Journal and Greenleaf’s Gazette*, October 29 1789.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

These objections to federal days of thanksgiving continued and had increased in number and fervency by 1795. The *Western Star* argued that neither the President nor a governor had any right to proclaim thanksgivings and that “No Magistrate under Heaven, has ever had the *just right* to tell people when, where, and how to worship God and punish them if they would not obey.”²²⁰ This newspaper was not critiquing the power of the federal government, but was in fact pushing America away from the belief that the nation had an obligation to encourage good citizenship and towards the idea that in a democracy individual freedom trumped the public good. These types of articles were rare but pointed towards an opinion that would increase throughout the 1790s; the new democratic government could not impinge on individual conscience by telling people how, when, or why to worship.

The assertion that national days of thanksgiving and fasting were inimical both to good government and good religion was not confined to America. In a pamphlet often reprinted in American newspapers, the prolific British pamphleteer William Fox decried England’s national fast days. His argument against the holiday was threefold; it went against the nature of Christianity, was not celebrated appropriately and finally, was a day which joined the purity of the church with the immorality of politics. Fox was particularly adamant that a *national* fast was inappropriate, calling on Christians to “not merely decline joining in a fast, but even start with horror at the thought, from the consideration that amidst all the corruptions with which the national professions of Christianity abound, fasting is that subject which has been peculiarly selected by them to be placed in the most farcical point of view, and to degrade and to insult, not only

²²⁰ “Miscellaneous Strictures and Questions by Jack Nips,” *Western Star* April 7th 1795.

religion and morality, but the common sense and language of mankind.”²²¹ Fox asserted that Christianity was rarely in line with the desires of a secular government and that the mere idea of fasting had been so corrupted as to be inimical to God, rather than ingratiating. The pamphleteer argued that men did not abstain from eating as would befit a fast, but they insisted that “fasting should mean feasting on the most delicate viands in distinction from common and ordinary food.”²²² Fox’s words rung home in America, as well. The *Morning Star* of Massachusetts and the *American Mercury* of Connecticut reprinted the pamphlet. Both of these newspapers ostensibly supported New England’s tradition of thanksgiving and fasting as opposed to England’s wicked holidays, and by reprinting Fox’s tirade, they demonstrated the importance of such fasts remaining the responsibility of local and state governments instead of the national government.

Theological challenges

In one of the more blatant rejections of Washington’s 1795 thanksgiving, the Connecticut Episcopal Church, headed by Bishop Samuel Seabury, refused to celebrate a thanksgiving during Lent. While the presidential proclamation had called for clergy to read the document in worship so that citizens would know about the upcoming celebration, the Connecticut Episcopal Church did not read the proclamation or acknowledge the day with a suitable liturgy. The Episcopal Church, especially in New England, was still on rocky footing since they represented England’s established church

²²¹ See also the reprints in the *Western Star* on July 1 and 8 1794.

²²² William Fox, *A Discourse, Occasioned by the National Fast, February 28, 1794*, (M. Gurney, 1794.) Accessed from Google Books.

in America.²²³ The denomination had set specific days for thanksgiving and fasting at the 1785 General Assembly in Philadelphia which highlighted how such days could prove politically tricky. The General Assembly established both the Fourth of July and the first Thursday of November as days of thanksgiving. Yet, some members of the church expressed concern that having the Fourth of July as a day of thanksgiving would cause issues with the English Episcopal hierarchy because “This necessarily implies that before that time [the revolution] we were in a state of slavery. The Bishops of England would appear in a strange attitude to set to their hands that the King, Lords, and Commons were a pack of tyrants; and kept us in a state of slavery till we threw off the yoke.”²²⁴ Between concerns about representing themselves appropriately to the English hierarchy and trying to appease Americans who were wary of Anglican leaders’ loyalty, the Protestant Episcopal Church in America walked a fine line between proclaiming themselves to be proud Americans and appearing as if they were English apologists.

The local newspapers seized upon this slight by the Episcopal Church. An editorial written by “Plain Truth,” claimed that “the proclamation was *not* read in the Episcopal Church...and to complete this system of disrespect to the government—on the day appointed for public Thanksgiving, the church was shut up and *no notice taken of the*

²²³ For a discussion of Anglican Americans after the Revolution, see; Bruce E. Steiner, *Connecticut Anglicans in the Revolutionary Era: A Study in Communal Tensions*, Connecticut Bicentennial Series, (Hartford: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1978.) and Peter M. Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity: Imperial Anglicanism in British North America, 1745-1795*, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000.)

²²⁴ Jeremiah Leaming to Rev. Abraham Beach, Stratford, September 12 1786. Eben Edwards Beardsley and Samuel Seabury. *Life and Correspondence of the Right Reverend Samuel Seabury, D.D.: First Bishop of Connecticut, and of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, (Houghton, Mifflin, 1881)

day.²²⁵ After this exposure in print, a “churchman” wrote an apology explaining why the church had chosen to ignore the political directive. According to the Churchman, the February thanksgiving fell uncomfortably in the first week of lent, which was a time of fasting and prayer, not of thanksgiving. Thus, some clergy and laity chose to ignore the President’s thanksgiving day in order to obey the dictates of their conscience. The Churchman continued that they did not think this was a slight done consciously by the President since governmental fast days often fell during Easter week when thanksgiving would be more appropriate. According to the author, Bishop Seabury had approached the Governor about this unfortunate repeated mixing of sacred time, but no change had been forthcoming. Yet, as a reply to the Churchman indicates, rarely had this issue been raised before. Moreover, the rebuttal argued that those who ignored the thanksgiving were doing so because they were following the dictates of their church which was nominally headed by the King of England; these people passed up the government of their own country for that of another. Here was an objection to the thanksgiving couched in religious terms but which, to many, smacked of political dissatisfaction.²²⁶

Other citizens fully embraced the 1795 thanksgiving as they had the national thanksgiving in 1789. “An American” asserted that thanksgiving was “*good to do*” and an important unifying event for the nation. In contrast with those who saw national thanksgivings as placing the federal government on a pedestal, this writer thought that “Every state, every person, every interest, is included in our prayers and praises.”²²⁷ The

²²⁵ “From the Connecticut Gazette,” *American Mercury*, March 10 1795.

²²⁶ “Churchman’s Apology,” *Connecticut Gazette*, March 19 1795; “A Reply to A Churchman’s Apology,” *Connecticut Gazette*, March 26 1795.

²²⁷ “Thanksgiving of the United States,” *Gazette of the United States*, February 16 1795.

Massachusetts Mercury reported that on thanksgiving “every tongue pronounced conviction of the propriety of expressing our gratitude for our unrivaled prosperity and the shout jubilant was vociferated from every lip.”²²⁸ The paper asserted this in spite of their belief that those who objected to the thanksgiving celebration were the same who “never go farther to enquire, whether a thing is done by the Federal Government, to condemn it.”²²⁹

Washington’s two thanksgivings were different in reason and execution and the response to these holidays was also markedly varied. Americans embraced the 1789 thanksgiving celebration as the appropriate political and religious response to the Constitution. The thanksgiving was seen as a continuation of the American tradition of thanking God for the blessings of the nation. Those who questioned the event did so because of concerns about the role of the new federal government, not because of the holiday itself. The 1795 event, however, was objectionable because it conflicted with both political and religious tenets. Politically, some thought the holiday smacked of monarchy and absolute rule. Religiously, it fell during a season of fasting and, in contrast to popular beliefs in the 1770s and 1780s, seemed to require a particular religious behavior out of citizens free to worship as they pleased.

Providence, Parties, and the Decline of Fast Days in the Early Republic

²²⁸ “Boston, Tuesday February 17 1795,” *Massachusetts Mercury* February 13 to February 17 1795.

²²⁹ “Thanksgiving,” *Massachusetts Mercury*, January 5th through January 9th 1795.

As the debates over thanksgiving and the Constitution demonstrate, Americans' focus shifted from fasting during a time of war to feasting during a time of peace in the 1790s. With the major exception of Adams' fast-giving days in 1797 and 1798, fasting was not a part of national discourse during the decade. While there are several reasons for the decline of the fast day, one of the most important reasons was the transformation of providential thought in America. During the Revolution, Americans had imagined that God intended for the nation to become great. Once the nation was established, many people viewed their national destiny as completed. America had become God's chosen nation and His providence was seen more often in the blessings God provided than in the tragedies brought about because of America's sins.

This emphasis on God's blessings in the new nation was amply evident in the many thanksgiving poems printed in newspapers throughout the 1790s. These poems were prominent in the northern states, but were also often republished throughout the United States. Frequently, these poems invoked God's providential role in America. One poet stressed that "Thy blessings on thy people show'r / Thine arm defends the Fed'ral Cause" as well as "Union tis God alone inspires / Founded by Heav'n, our States shall rise / Th' astonish'd world our Plan admires / And owns the counsel of the skies."²³⁰ In this poem, God's role in America is always positive, the poet points out no flaws in American behavior or sins with which God might find fault. Moreover, God is so aligned with American success and union that any removal of his approval is almost unthinkable. America is ordained to continue its ascent without fear of failure. As the poet concludes, "New empires never rise by *chance*, / no *Jeering* Gales promotions blow-- / a Righteous

²³⁰ "Calliopean Fount," *Albany Register* December 15, 1794.

Judge doth States advance, / and lay oppressive monarchs low.”²³¹ While America faced real dangers during the 1790s, the Whiskey Rebellion, European warfare, and other crises, Americans generally saw the national government as becoming more stable and solid. This increasing belief that America was a thriving country with a set national identity made fast days less appealing. Such an event was less necessary to save a divided and uncertain young nation. Before the Revolution, fast days had tended to be local events, designed for municipalities to beg God’s mercy in the face of natural disaster. While the American colonies had joined together in fasting and prayer during the Revolution, as America became a stable and independent nation, the idea of a national fast day gradually retreated and was once again replaced with local expressions of prayer and humiliation.

Prose writers also remembered thanksgiving as the main moment for recognizing the role providence had played in the perpetuation of the nation. In a piece on Boston thanksgivings printed by the *Baltimore Evening Post*, thanksgiving was seen as the only moment for celebrating God’s providence at the expense of the annual fast or the Fourth of July which many had envisioned would become a national thanksgiving celebration. The article began with an explanation of the centrality of thanksgiving which was “designed to unite nearly four hundred thousand fellow citizens in one solemn act of devotion.” According to the article, thanksgiving’s long history in Massachusetts should influence current citizens’ devotion to the holiday. And in a display of providential theology the article claimed that the blessings that state had experienced meant that observance of the holiday should continue. “Indeed,” the article exclaims, “God hath

²³¹ Ibid.

done Great things for us, whereof we are glad....And the bosom that swells not with Praise, must be insensible to all the feelings which adorn human nature.”²³²

Thanksgiving, as opposed to fast days, celebrated the ever expanding national economy, borders, population, and system of government. This holiday seemed perfectly suited to a nation which had come of age, where fast days recalled only despair, concern, and the threat of disaster.

As Americans’ vision of providence became increasingly positive rather than emphasizing the negative aspects of providence which had been crucial both during the Revolution and in early modern Europe, citizens also began to embrace the festive culture associated with thanksgiving celebrations. While thanksgiving had long been associated with feasting and even with family gatherings, the thanksgiving celebrations of the 1790s included dances, fireworks, and other leisure activities which gave the day a merry and secular appearance. Unlike fast days, which were somber and involved self-denial, thanksgiving offered an opportunity for fun and frolic. In Connecticut, the General Assembly felt the need to enact fines for those found breaking the solemnity of the fast. The legislature approved a fine of six to twelve shillings for those who did not “abstain from every kind of servile Labour, and recreation.”²³³ Illuminations and bonfires became more common thanksgiving day occurrences during the 1790s and were frequent sources of fire and injury. In 1792, several newspapers recorded a tragic thanksgiving accident involving a bonfire set by a group of boys who in their revelry set of a “swivel” firework with too much gunpowder. The swivel struck and instantly killed one boy. The article

²³² “Boston, November 30th, Thanksgiving Day,” *Baltimore Evening Post* December 14 1793.

²³³ *Norwich Packet*, November 17 1791.

ended with the stern admonition, “that the savage action of making bonfires on the evening of thanksgiving may be exchanged for some other mode of rejoicing, more consistent with the genuine spirit of Christianity.”²³⁴

One example of this growing tradition was the illuminations suggested for Washington’s 1795 thanksgiving which were considered contentious because they seemed to honor a man, and not God. One Boston newspaper printed a series of pieces on the legitimacy and wisdom of holding an illumination for Washington on thanksgiving night. After an initial call for thanksgiving to close with a spectacle in honor of Washington, a flurry of objections to the idea were printed in the paper. Writing under the penname “Civis,” a Boston citizen argued that fireworks were an inappropriate expression of political praise on a religious holiday. Clearly, however, his more pressing concern was that “*this chief of patriots* stands not in need of such tokens of respect” because “the many unwearied and patriotic exertions of this *man of the people*...will ever call forth the cordial, grateful acknowledgments of every class of citizens.”²³⁵ Similarly in the *Columbian Centinel*, “Servius” objected to the illumination because of cost, the threat of fire, and the fact that the illumination was meant to honor a man, the presidential title, or the federal government generally with no indication that the state level was equally important to the workings of the government. He demands to know “Can Washington be pleased with such evidence of our love? Would not tears of *Sorrow*, rather than tears of *Joy*, wetten the cheeks of THAT GREAT MAN, at such a testimony

²³⁴ “Norwich, December 4th,” *Connecticut Gazette*, December 6 1792.

²³⁵ *Federal Orrery*, January 19 1795.

of our disposition to honor him?”²³⁶ As a holiday intended to benefit the nation, thanksgiving represented for many Americans a proper integration of church and state, but as that holiday became less about the religious obligation of good citizens and more about the celebration of Washington, some citizens began to question whether the holiday was proper at all.

Many newspapers were careful to stress that thanksgiving days were held with decorum and solemnity. In fact, many papers were so careful to note that these days were more carefully held than usual that the implication was that many thanksgiving days were noisy, boisterous, and generally meant for merrymaking rather than for religious devotion. One New York newspaper reported in 1795 that “Last Thursday was a truly solemn day, and every heart seemed replete with THANKSGIVING and Praise for the experience mercy of our common Father—businesses totally subsided for the day, and the churches were more thronged than usual.”²³⁷ In a similarly telling praise for a well-kept thanksgiving, a Massachusetts newspaper correspondent described a 1790 thanksgiving celebration as having

no noise, no unmanly gambols of childish joy, no tumultuous scenes of riot, dissipation, or drunkenness was heard, or seen to disgrace our streets, or dishonor the day. All was peaceable, quiet, serious, sober, and decent; and the several places of religious worship were filled with the various members of their respective denominations, on whose countenances beamed lively gratitude to the FATHER OF ALL MERCIES....²³⁸

This list of how the day was *not* spent indicates that often thanksgivings were moments of fun, riot, and revelry. The break from labor was often spent in leisure

²³⁶ “Illumination,” *Columbian Centinel*, January 21 1795.

²³⁷ *Greenleaf’s New York Journal*, November 28 1795.

²³⁸ “Thanksgiving Day—Thursday last,” *Columbian Centinel* November 27 1790.

pursuits, not in the churches, and was an increasing secular celebration. Despite the fact that thanksgiving proclamations, sermons, and newspaper articles touted the religious observance of the day and played up the important aspect of providential theology, American citizens seemed more likely to merit the day as a political holiday intended as pleasure rather than patriotism.

Thanksgiving in the Nation: Regionalism and Westward Expansion in the 1790s and 1800s

The nation had been the central concern for thanksgivings and fast days during the Revolution and through the 1789 federal thanksgiving. During the 1790s, however, the New England thanksgiving tradition began to develop and expansion into Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee helped to drive regional competition over patriotism, virtue, and Christian piety. Local and state thanksgivings became a source of national competition rather than national unity with various cities, states, and denominations attempting to prove that their holiday best demonstrated the civic and religious obligations of a democratic citizenry. This shifting view of the event meant that local thanksgivings became a way of establishing credentials as good Americans, especially for those on the frontier of American civilization. While the blessings given to America continued to drive thanksgiving celebrations, gradually citizens began to separate the nation from the pride they felt for their region.

One reason for the fracture of national thanksgiving celebrations was the rise of the New England Thanksgiving commemoration. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, while people in New England had celebrated thanksgiving with more regularity than other areas of the nation, the celebration had not been understood as beginning in

New England. While Massachusetts and Connecticut were recognized for their annual thanksgiving and fast day tradition, states such as Pennsylvania and South Carolina had also held almost yearly events. In the 1790s, the language about thanksgiving began to change. In his 1795 thanksgiving proclamation, Samuel Adams called on the citizens of Massachusetts to celebrate the holiday which was “the Ancient and Laudable Practice of our renowned Ancestors.” This proclamation privileged the New England thanksgiving tradition by highlighting the state’s long history of observing the holiday, but then listed the blessings given by God throughout the year which included the federal government.²³⁹ Governor Adams’ proclamation seemed to extend what he saw as a Puritan tradition to encompass the entirety of the American nation; a blessing for which the pious Massachusetts citizens might thank God. Other citizens associated Massachusetts and the rest of New England with a special version of American providence. They argued that these states had long been favored by God and in the new nation continued to be so chosen. One newspaper article claimed that “Massachusetts...has been highly favoured of the Highest” and thus had a long history of fervent thanksgivings. Along with being a favorite of God, the article also took pains to point out that it was “independent, sovereign and free” and would respect President Washington, but only truly love those men who had come from the state itself such as Hancock or Adams.²⁴⁰ While not denying the importance of thanksgiving in other states, this article clearly set up Massachusetts as the wellspring of true thanksgiving spirit.

²³⁹ Samuel Adams, “A Proclamation for a Day of Public Thanksgiving” Oct. 15th, 1795 Early American Imprints no. 29037.

²⁴⁰ “Boston November 30th, Thanksgiving Day,” *Baltimore Evening Post* December 14 1793.

Increasingly, the New England states held their thanksgiving celebrations on the same day and touted their thanksgivings as a particular tradition. When discussing the possibility of having an illumination for the national 1795 thanksgiving, one writer noted that “The four New England states had recently a Thanksgiving; the relics of Christmas festivity are yet in existence; and we are presented with another day of thanksgiving which is only another name for a day of idleness and gluttony.”²⁴¹ New England’s thanksgiving celebration took pride of place in this article and was clearly considered more legitimate than a national thanksgiving held in February. New England thanksgivings were seen as a local custom in other years as well. In 1799, the *Mercantile Advertiser* noted that thanksgiving was held in the “three New England states, agreeably to their anniversary customs.”²⁴² These “anniversary” holidays were the basis for claiming that New England had a special relationship with thanksgiving and fasting. In his famous *Geography*, Dr. Jedidiah Morse highlighted New England’s tradition with these holidays saying, “There is one distinguishing characteristic in the religious character of this people, which we must not omit to mention; and that is the custom of annually celebrating Fasts and Thanksgivings... This pious custom originated with their venerable ancestors, the first settlers of New England; and has been handed down as sacred, through the successive generations to their posterity.”²⁴³ Morse’s *Geography* was

²⁴¹ “Illumination,” *Columbian Centinel* January 21 1795.

²⁴² *Mercantile Advertiser*, December 2 1799.

²⁴³ Jedidiah Morse, Aaron Arrowsmith, and Samuel Lewis. *The American Universal Geography, Or, A View of the Present State of All the Empires, Kingdoms, States, and Republicks in the Known World, and of the United States of America in Particular ...* (J.T. Buckingham,) E.A.I., 1805, 323.

used throughout the United States and was considered the premier text for teaching children about the world. Thus, his assertion that fasts and thanksgivings were a unique characteristic of New England was memorized by students throughout the nation. Rather than learning that fasts and thanksgivings had been observed by the nation as a whole and by every British colony, students in the early republic learned that only New England was pious enough to uphold these traditions.

As if to further highlight the uniqueness of the region, displaced New Englanders living in other parts of the nation would sometimes gather together on the day of the annual thanksgiving in Massachusetts or Connecticut and celebrate the day as “Yankees.” One such gathering was held at Philadelphia in 1815. The description of the event stated that “The natives and descendants of Yankee Land...celebrated our late annual thanksgiving with a public dinner, got up in Yankee style, and complimented with yankee toasts and hymns [sic].” Throughout the piece the emphasis on a particular “Yankee” style of celebration and of “our,” meaning New England’s, annual thanksgiving displays the evolution of an understanding that thanksgiving was a particular New England tradition that Philadelphians not from New England could not quite understand. This article in particular was reprinted in the *Northern Whig* from the *Boston Centinel* which was relaying this description of a New England Thanksgiving commemoration in Philadelphia back to New Englanders. As native New Englanders found themselves emigrating away from an increasingly crowded region, they took their traditions and rituals with them and those people who remained at home could take comfort in the fact that their far-flung families had not forgotten home. From such a description of Yankee celebrations, New

Englanders could be confident that their traditions and values were being practiced throughout the nation.²⁴⁴

This propagation of New English tradition did not mean that every American citizen embraced New England's version of the holiday. The *South Carolina Gazette* in 1802 published an "estimate of the good things consumed in New England, on thanksgiving day" which derisively recorded such quantities as 125,000 geese, 1.5 million chickens (some for roasting and some for chicken pot pie), 2.5 million pumpkin pies, and 2.5 million dozens of apples. After listing these and other delicacies, the writer of the article observes, "that if the turkeys, geese, and chickens could speak, they would turn jacobins, and join the Rhode Island assembly, in rejecting a day that is so fatal to their sect!" Several things seem to be being mocked in this article: New Englanders for the sheer quantity of food consumed on their thanksgivings and the Rhode Island assembly which had recently debated the validity of state-proclaimed days of religious observance. This piece was printed throughout the nation, in South Carolina as well as Massachusetts, New York, Vermont and Pennsylvania. The joke was widespread with the nation as a whole enjoying the joke at New England's expense. The ostentatious and gluttonous display of wealth and plenty that characterized New England's celebration was perceived as being unique to that region.²⁴⁵

Always questionable in its status as part of the New England states, Rhode Island frequently proclaimed thanksgiving days but also vigorously debated whether such

²⁴⁴ *The Northern Whig* (Hudson, NY), December 26th, 1815. On the role of molasses in New England see: Gilman M. Ostrander, "The Colonial Molasses Trade," *Agricultural History* 30, no. 2 (April 1956): 77-84.

²⁴⁵ *The South Carolina State Gazette* (Charleston), January 6 1802.

holidays were appropriate in a republic. The state became a point of hilarity throughout the nation as their failure to pass a thanksgiving proclamation seemed absurd and secular, justifying the charge of “Jacobin.” Even though many citizens celebrated the holiday in a secular manner, the overall impression of the holiday remained religious during the 1790s and any active attempt to remove religion from public civic practice drew ridicule. In Rhode Island, one newspaper reported that when the legislature was debating over recommending a day of thanksgiving “among the nays...we observe one King, one Knight, and three Arnolds!”²⁴⁶ This assertion, that only royalists or turncoats would not support a public thanksgiving, was frequent as were accusations of Jacobin secularism which was used by the *Western Star* during the Rhode Island debate.²⁴⁷ While some scholars might see these references to Jacobinism and turncoats as purely the result of party politics or regional factionalism, these debates were all rooted in concern over the relationship between church and state. The Rhode Island assembly’s debate focused on whether such religious celebrations could be promoted by the government, and the article on New England’s gluttonous holiday questioned whether the religious aspect of thanksgiving was truly still celebrated.

Certainly, these descriptions and jests point to the development of a New England style of thanksgiving celebration, but that does not mean that New England was the locus of all thanksgiving celebrations. Charleston, South Carolina was one city that continued to hold frequent thanksgiving celebrations into the nineteenth century. One such proclamation for a public thanksgiving appeared in the *Charleston Courier* on November 17, 1806. Like northern proclamations, the city council observed that thanksgivings were

²⁴⁶ *Gazette of the United States*, November 12 1801.

²⁴⁷ “Jacobin Morality” *Western Star*, November 28 1801.

a “mark of respect, duty and gratitude, towards the Omnipotent Disposer of events” who that year particularly had favored the city in regards to health and weather. Unlike most northern proclamations, there was no requirement that the day be treated like the Sabbath, the council merely “earnestly recommend[ed] it to their fellow-citizens most rigidly to observe [it].”²⁴⁸ However, as South Carolina’s newspapers noted, the thanksgivings were considered bank holidays along with public feast days, the Fourth of July, Christmas and other religious holidays.²⁴⁹ Even outside of New England, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, local governments felt comfortable calling their citizens to participate in a religious event and ordering the clergy to encourage such religious zeal.

Frontier states and territories often used thanksgiving days to demonstrate their patriotism and desire to be incorporated into American life. Although Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and other frontier areas had not been American territory at the outset of the Revolution, the new immigrants to these areas wanted to prove their ability to act as good American citizens even in the midst of the wilderness. Civil and religious liberty was a frequent blessing cited in these thanksgiving proclamations, one which highlighted both why churches supported the federal government and which demonstrated how many citizens conceived of the relationship between church and state. The church, protected by the government from persecution and from state intrusion on their beliefs, in turn offered up prayers to God and instilled a sense of obligation and duty in the citizens of the nation. Citizens of western states in particular embraced the thanksgivings proposed by clergymen. The uptick of thanksgivings in Ohio and Kentucky reflected the belief that

²⁴⁸ “City Council, November 10, 1806,” *Charleston (S.C.) Courier*, November 17, 1806.

²⁴⁹ “Bank of South Carolina,” *General Advertiser* September 4, 1792.

capable citizens supported their political actions with religious belief. The state did not have to initiate days of thanksgiving for such days to reflect the blessings of the nation or the will of its citizens. In Marietta, Ohio three clergymen called for a day of thanksgiving for the citizens of Washington County, in “concurrence with the churches” because of many blessings including “the continued and unmolested enjoyment of our rights and privileges, civil and religious.”²⁵⁰ The true citizen with his interest in the nation would have a “usual” place of worship and would thank the Creator for his blessings because providence and covenant theology required it. In the *Western Monitor* this good Christian citizen was a representative of “Christian Republicanism” who believed “in a superintending Providence over national and state affairs, and regards his revealed will as the rule of conduct which leads to prosperity, happiness, and peace.”²⁵¹ Such people were opposed to the French democracy which was anti-Christian and thus doomed to fail. The perfect example of a Christian republican, in the writer’s mind, was the Elkhorn Baptist association which had recently called a thanksgiving day to celebrate Commodore Perry’s victory on Lake Erie. Such an act was “bottomed upon the belief that God gives success to our arms, and also, that “the nation and kingdom that will not serve the Lord shall perish...”²⁵² Especially when faced with the vision of secular France, Americans generally recognized the benefit of a Christian citizen and upheld the belief that church and state, although separate, mutually supported each other. Even when the government

²⁵⁰ “Notice for a day of Thanksgiving and Praise” *Western Spectator*, November 6, 1810.

²⁵¹ “Christian Republicanism” *Western Monitor*, September 9, 1814.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

did not call for them, thanksgivings played a crucial role in creating moments of Christian citizenship.

Adams, Jefferson, and subsequent presidents could avoid calling for thanksgivings and fast days in part because religious denominations were proclaiming their own national events. While formal associations of churches had begun developing earlier in the century, the 1790s saw Protestant sects, particularly the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, increasingly create general assemblies and other governing bodies to shape a common set of beliefs and behaviors throughout their associated congregations. This centralization also encouraged denominations to set particular thanksgiving and fast days for their congregations under the assumption that such religious worship should be at the discretion of religious, not political, leaders. This attitude complimented the political opinion that thanksgivings and fast days could not be proclaimed in a republic because they infringed on rights of conscience. In response to a cholera epidemic in Philadelphia and other major cities, the Pennsylvanian presbytery called for a day of fasting and prayer in 1797. While the presbytery kept the list of sins limited to those relating to the religious devotion of the American people, they asked God to extend his blessings to the president and other politicians.²⁵³

As political tensions heated up in Europe and between America and France, the Presbyterian Church in America took it upon itself to prevent God's wrath from once again embroiling America in war. In a pastoral letter sent to congregations throughout the nation, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church called for all congregations to participate in a day of fasting and prayer to appease God and atone for the sins of a

²⁵³ "Act of the Associate Presbytery of Pennsylvania for a Public Fast," *Philadelphia Gazette*, November 6, 1797.

nation since the proclamation argued that the war clearly indicated God had turned against America. The letter pleads with the clergy to “direct your awakened attention towards that bursting storm, which threatens to sweep before it the religious principles, morals, and institutions of our people.—We are filled with a deep concern and an awful dread, whilst we announce it as our real conviction, that the eternal God has a controversy with our nation. . . .”²⁵⁴ The Presbyterian Church was taking it upon itself, as a religious denomination, to protect the nation. No longer did they see religious protection as the duty of all men as citizens, but instead they saw it as the duty of all good Christian (especially Presbyterian) men. The letter further argued that the nation was experiencing “A visible and prevailing impiety, and contempt for the laws and institutions of religion, and an abounding infidelity, which, in many instances, leads to Atheism itself. . . . Our circumstances loudly demand a public and solemn acknowledgement of God as our moral governor and righteous judge.” Thus, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America called for a day of fasting and prayer on the last Thursday of August, 1798.²⁵⁵

Local papers reported on how Presbyterian churches observed the holiday. In New York, the *Daily Advertiser* stated that the fast was held to atone for “individual and national sins.” The *Daily Advertiser* noted that even those who objected to that church’s theology should countenance such days because religion aided in “curbing the passions, preserving the obligations of moral duty, and strengthening the bonds of civilized society.

²⁵⁴ “Letter No. 1,” *The Theological Timepiece or, synopsis of Religious Sentiment*, March-May 1798.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

In this view, every friend of government should give it countenance and support.”²⁵⁶

This article underlines both the responsibility of American’s to uphold civic morality through religion, but also that this duty did not need to be pressed upon citizens by the government itself. Religious denominations could and should provide that service for the good of the nation. Other papers openly meshed the religious and political sentiments of the holiday. Philadelphia’s *Federal Gazette* called Reverend Allison’s fast day oration a “political sermon” and applauded his “fervent piety” and “uncontaminated patriotism” in the same sentence.²⁵⁷

The Baptist and Methodist associations also used thanksgiving and fast days to unite congregations across the nation. In 1797, the Baptist Association celebrated a fast day on October 23rd which was observed throughout the country. In Philadelphia, the day was reported as being “on account of the prevalence of vice and immorality and the late calamitous visitation in this and other places in the United States” which referred to the bouts of sickness that had swept through several major cities throughout the year.²⁵⁸

Such a fast day united Americans of a particular denomination in religious ritual, but did not infringe on the opinions of those who were Americans but not Baptists or particularly inclined towards religious worship. Similarly, March 4 1796 was observed by the “Methodist Episcopal thro’out the United States of America as a most solemn day of

²⁵⁶ *Daily Advertiser*, August 31, 1798.

²⁵⁷ *Federal Gazette* September 3, 1798.

²⁵⁸ “Domestic Intelligence,” *The Timepiece and Literary Companion*, October 25 1797.

fasting, humiliation, prayer and supplication; and was recommended to be attended to with Sabbatical strictness.”²⁵⁹

In a particularly eloquent 1794 proclamation, the Dutch Reformed Church in America demonstrated the growing belief that upholding the nation’s morality was the responsibility of the myriad denominations. According to the proclamation, “Our God hath done great things for the United States of America... Yet to those who can form an estimate of our national character, and judge without partiality and prejudice, it is evident, that we have not requited God aright, or wisely improved the blessings of liberty.” The Dutch Reformed church turned to the theology of providence to demonstrate American citizens’ religious duty. Americans had failed this duty because “Instead of gratitude, reverence for religion, devotion in worship, and zeal for the glory of God; unthankfulness, impiety, and an undisguised contempt for the word and ordinances prevail... The end of these things, unless we reform, must be, to individuals death; and to our public weal, destruction. Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach and a ruin to any people.” In no uncertain terms, this fast day proclamation sets out the reasons why a denomination would call for such a holiday; first, to encourage repentance amongst its own congregants and second, to protect the nation which they viewed as a boon to religious and civil freedoms. To further demonstrate how one denomination could atone for the sins of a nation, the proclamation called for congregants to “be greatly affected with the sins and guilt with which we, and our nation, are chargeable; and to remember... That the best interests of Society are most advanced by

²⁵⁹ *Massachusetts Mercury*, March 11, 1796.

pure and undefiled religion.”²⁶⁰ The Dutch Reformed Church sought to bring God’s blessings to the nation through its own recognition of the nation’s sinfulness. Much like the fast day proclamation put forth by the states and the Continental Congress, this proclamation listed the sins and catastrophes suffered by America’s citizens and saw a fast day as the best way for Christian citizens to aid the nation.

While these Protestant denominations used thanksgiving and fast days as part of their church calendar, the Protestant Episcopal Church in America used thanksgiving and fast days as a way of creating a distinctly American denomination out of England’s established church. The national convention of this denomination established a set schedule for fast and thanksgiving days in the 1780s, while state and local church leaders encouraged separate observances. In the fall of 1798, under the threat of war, Maryland’s bishop, Thomas Clagett, called for a fast day because “Our country is threatened by a nation, whose aim is plunder, and the destruction of morals and religion; and God will make bare his arm in our defense...if we would repent of our sins...”²⁶¹ The nation who threatened America was none other than England, the episcopal home of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Clagett further distanced his diocese from the British by stating that “No nation on earth has been so highly favoured as we have been in our original establishment and particularly in our contest during the revolutionary war.” Perhaps no other denomination had been as heavily impacted by the revolution as the Episcopal Church. That church required a new bishopric, name, and governing body in order to continue to exist in America after the revolution. And so, as war with Britain became

²⁶⁰ “The Synod of the Reformed Dutch Church,” *Columbian Centinel*, November 3, 1794.

²⁶¹ “Baltimore, Sept. 8th To the members of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the state of Maryland,” *New Jersey Journal* September 25, 1798.

more and more likely in the 1790s, that denomination spent considerable time demonstrating their solid credentials as model citizens, including calling for fast days to atone for the sins of individuals and the nation.

As had been the case during and after the Revolution, Quakers continued to object to public thanksgivings and the call to cease work that accompanied these events. While their loyalty to the American nation was not typically questioned in the 1790s, their brand of Christianity and its compatibility with a virtuous government often was. When a group of Quakers moved to close the theater in one American city, proponents of the business turned to Quaker dismissal of thanksgiving days as proof that their version of Christianity was suspect. In a discussion that encompassed both the continued role of Christian belief in the nation and the changing notions of providence, these men argued that closing theatrical productions was “unconstitutional, this unjust request, is ushered in by the false glare, the pretended zeal of religion, as if a particular Society of set of men were to be the conscience keepers of the other or were to be held responsible for transgressions not their own.”²⁶² According to this editorialist, individual Americans no longer had a responsibility to the nation to court God’s favor, or at least that obligation did not extend to activities such as theater-going. As if recognizing that this argument went against engrained American tradition, the author then turned to Quaker behavior during a recent thanksgiving day during which the Quakers

set at defiance an ordinance of our Government to set apart a particular day to return thanks to Heaven for the many mercies which we have received and pursue their worldly employments. This contempt not only of the Government...ought to reciprocate the feeling which *they* have for every denomination except their own—Let them go to Heaven their own

²⁶² “For the General Advertiser,” *Gazette of the United States*, December 19, 1793.

way, but let them relinquish a dictatorship, and allow others the same indulgence.²⁶³

In this way, he separated thanksgiving from compulsory religious observance, but still denoted Quaker objections to the event as both anti-American and anti-Christian because they sought to impose their beliefs on others.

Even as the various denominations undertook to atone for the sins of the nation through fasting, the blessings for thanksgiving days were becoming more ecumenical and individual with more emphasis on prosperity than on God's wrathful providence. The sense that Americans needed to have a united religious experience to ensure His blessings was subsiding and was replaced with a sense that all Americans needed an individual sense of religious morality and civic virtue. In other words, thanksgiving should be something an individual chose to participate in, not something that was encouraged or required by the government. In one list of the blessings of the nation on a thanksgiving day, the *Federal Gazette* placed religious diversity and harmony at the top of the list.

America has seen the days when Catholicism was dreaded as the Hydra. These hours, thank Heaven! Are forever past. Episcopalians, Catholics, Congregationalists, Baptists &c. regard each other with the generous eye of paternal affection. Deity is considered as the center of the circle, and different denominations, as Radii drawn from the circumference to the center, where they meet in one point;--equally distant from, and equally near to, the Father spirit of the whole.²⁶⁴

When the Continental Congress had first gathered in Philadelphia in 1774, some politicians had argued that the varied lot could not even pray together. By the 1790s, this concern had been replaced with praise for the heterogeneous religious makeup of the American nation. One of the many blessings the nation could

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ "Reflections," *Federal Gazette*, November 28, 1791.

boast, according to many, was that no state church hindered the individual conscience.

Party Politics, Regional Squabbles, and John Adams' *Fastgiving*

In 1798 and 1799, President John Adams called for a rather unusual national celebration; a combination of thanksgiving and fasting. His 1798 celebration was held May 9th and recommended that the “duties of humiliation and prayer be joined with fervent thanksgiving to the Bestower of Ever Good Gift.”²⁶⁵ By 1798, there had not been a national fast day in over fifteen years and this proclamation was significantly different from Washington’s thanksgiving proclamations in 1789 and 1795. While Washington’s thanksgiving proclamations attempted to draw the nation together despite initial objections from the congressmen of South Carolina, John Adam’s proclamation seemed instead to contribute to the divisions wrought by party politics and an unpopular foreign policy during his presidency. Although as a New Englander he should have had a clear understanding of the importance of and distinctions between fast and thanksgiving days, Adams meshed the two celebrations together in his presidential proclamations. The oddity of this “fastgiving” along with the political tensions that already surrounded the president and his administration, added to the growing sense that governmental religious rituals were political plays rather than true expressions of pious feeling.

Fasting was an honored early modern ritual which many states had celebrated for years. The Continental Congress had also called for national days of fasting and prayer which were observed especially during the late 1770s as war began to tax the spirit of the nation. These national and state thanksgivings were intended to atone for the sins of a

²⁶⁵ John Adams, “Proclamation,” 1798.

nation in the hope that God would bless the nation with martial victory and economic gain. The fast days of 1798 and 1799 were the only national fasts held in America after the Constitution because neither Washington nor Congress ever proposed such an action; thanksgiving was much more in accord with the sentiments of a newly united nation than fasting and humiliation. President Adams' events were not, however, traditional fast day celebrations. They differed in important ways from state fast day proclamations which never used the word 'thanksgiving.' For example, the Massachusetts fast of 1798 asked citizens to "confess their sins" and "implore the favor and blessing of the ALMIGHTY God" on a number of pressing political issues. The proclamation explicitly does not ask the citizens to remember what good God has already wrought. Adams' proclamation, however, asks American citizens to remember "His [God's] having hitherto protected and preserved the people of these United States in the independent enjoyment of their religious and civil freedom, but also for having prospered them in a wonderful progress of population, and for conferring on them many and great favors conducive to the happiness and prosperity of a nation." The odd wording for Adams' 1799 fast day is nearly identical to his 1798 statement and raises the question of what he thought was the benefit of proclaiming a day which denoted such mixed sentiments.²⁶⁶

As tensions rose between Federalists and Democratic Republicans, religion became a touch point for identifying good and bad Americans. Strongly Federalist newspapers described Democratic Republicans as "enemies to Christianity," and "infidels."²⁶⁷ Accusations of irreligion were bandied about by Democrats as well.

²⁶⁶ John Adams, *A Day of Fasting and Humiliation*, (Philadelphia; s.n.) 1798; Increase Sumner, "Proclamation, March 1, 1789" (Boston; Young and Mings, 1798.)

Because religion was so frequently invoked in political rhetoric, Adams' proclamations created quite a political fervor as they had very real implications for which party was more pious and patriotic. A New Hampshire newspaper published an anecdote about a democratic Jacobin who supposedly worked his fields on the fast day. While the crop looked promising, cattle broke into the fields and destroyed all his "unlawful day's work." The paper hoped that "this visible judgment... may prove a salutary warning to all their fraternity, or their expected harvests must come short home."²⁶⁸ The *New Hampshire Gazette* "modernized" the words to John Trumbull's famous epic satire, *M'Finegal*, which had lambasted American Tories as being against both the patriot cause and good religion, to poke fun at the democrats who "when they the public fasts denied; Refus'd to heav'n to put a pray'r, because they've no connexions there."²⁶⁹

One of the reasons for calling for a fast day both in 1798 and 1799 was the continuing threat of war with Britain and the fallout of the French Revolution. As had been the case during the Revolution, fast days were a religious reaction to such threats and especially in Adams' ideology were a reminder to citizens that, although the Lord had greatly blessed the nation, He could also remove his blessings if the nation failed to maintain their devotion.

The origins of the 1798 fastgiving remain unclear. While in later years Adams was convinced that the holiday had effectively ended his hopes for a second term, he

²⁶⁷ "Communication," *Federal Galaxy*, January 16, 1798, *Centinel of Freedom*, January 29, 1799,

²⁶⁸ *Spectator*, September 17, 1799.

²⁶⁹ *New Hampshire Gazette*, May 1, 1798. See the similarity to John Trumbull's "M'Finegal," Trumbull, John. *M'Fingal: An Epic Poem*. (G. P. Putnam, 1860,) 40.

claimed also that he had envisioned and designed the day for some time before the proclamation was released in February. Alexander Hamilton also claimed credit for the occasion by encouraging one of his moles to push for the fast day. In a letter to James McHenry, the Secretary of War, Hamilton listed a number of political actions which Adams should make. After this long list, he noted, “Let the President recommend a day to be observed as a day of fasting humiliation & prayer. On religious ground this is very proper—On political, it is very expedient. The Government will be very unwise, if it does not make the most of the religious prepossessions of our people—opposing the honest enthusiasm of Religious Opinion to the phrenzy of Political fanaticism.”²⁷⁰ Hamilton made no secret of the political goals of a fast day. It could be used to counter the argument that war with Britain was the sole goal of the Federalist Party and that the party sacrificed religious obligation for political desire. In other words, fast days could sway the religiously-minded American and the federal government would be foolish not to use religio-political tradition for its own benefit.

The political divisions of the 1790s were amply demonstrated in responses to Adams’ fast-giving proclamation. Thanksgivings were already attached to feasting, so the President was ostensibly asking his nation to feast and fast in the same day. Vermont’s *Federal Galaxy* called the celebration “a day of fasting, thanksgiving, and prayer...” and encouraged the combination because it recognized the difficult situation the nation had with France by fasting and the privileged position of the American nation by thanksgiving. The *Gazette of the United States*, on the other hand, ran a piece mocking the multiple celebrations packed into one day and insinuated that President

²⁷⁰ Alexander Hamilton to James McHenry, 1798, Harold Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, Volume XXI: April 1797–July 1798.

Adams wanted only “to make every pulpit resound with declarations against France.”²⁷¹ When a federalist newspaper incorrectly printed the day of the 1799 fast as Thursday instead of Wednesday, the Democratic *Herald of Liberty* guffawed that “It is to be dreaded that *fasting* two days will produce at least some *disorder* in the stomachs of the Federalists—who are so remarkably fond of good living.”²⁷²

Some citizens opposed all thanksgiving and fast days because they had become political rather than moral or religious events. In particular, the *Aurora General Advertiser*, which was a democratic newspaper published in Philadelphia, objected both to President Adams and political days of prayer. In January 1799 the *Aurora* printed a series of pieces on the proliferation of pulpit politics in the “eastern” (New England) states. Fast and thanksgiving days, the pieces argued, “are too dangerous, too often abused to party purposes, in political affairs, not to merit or obtain the countenance of government.”²⁷³ According to the *Aurora* all such days of political prayer presented the danger of irreligion or religion for the sake of politics. Days of thanksgiving and fasting had become “merely days devoted to politics and give the sentiment for months. They are passed in meeting together, hearing prayers and sermons on themes foreign to gratitude or humiliation—to feasting, and mirth.” According to the paper, religion was often used as a scapegoat for inciting fanaticism as “whenever convulsions occur, or party rises, the first efforts are to draw religion into the contest.”²⁷⁴ The root of this

²⁷¹ “Vermont, Brattleboro May 8th” *Federal Galaxy* (Burlington, Vt.), May 8, 1798; *Gazette of the United States*, April 11, 1798;

²⁷² *Herald of Liberty*, April 22, 1799.

²⁷³ *Aurora General Advertiser*, January 9, 1799.

twisted system which encouraged the co-mingling of religion and politics was the universities which preached providential theology and party politics in the same breath. The year before, the newspaper printed an article all about “political prayer” just days before the national fastgiving day. The article defined political prayer as “forms of petitions for averting some real or supposed national calamity, and of thanks-giving for some real or supposed national blessing, drawn up by the leaders of church or state, and which the *great body of the people under certain penalties or discouragements, are bound to present to God.*”²⁷⁵ These types of prayers, the article asserted, have no root in New Testament scripture, are bound to be countermanded by political prayers from opposing countries and parties, and defeat the promise that God is a just arbiter by assuming that humans need to persuade him to their political position. Besides, the editor argued, religion “is a matter altogether between God and man” not between God and the state so the state should not command anyone to give thanksgiving or to fast under threat of punishment.

This opinion of both New England’s religious tradition and of thanksgiving and fast days had long been embraced by this particular paper. When the president proclaimed a fast day in 1798, the paper quickly moved to demonstrate that the proclamation was a political ploy. The editor argued that “For fear lest Omiscience should want intelligence respecting federal purity, and Jacobin guilt, our president has issued a proclamation for a fast and a thanksgiving both in one day.”²⁷⁶ The next day a

²⁷⁴ Ibid, January 1, 1799.

²⁷⁵ “Political Prayer,” *Aurora General Advertiser* May 14, 1798.

²⁷⁶ “For the Aurora,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, March 29, 1798.

letter appeared by “A good Christian and an enemy to hypocrisy” which also lambasted the president’s proclamation. As a Christian the author claims that he “applaud[s] religious acts at all times and in all places, in order, if prosperous, to return thanks to the Almighty for the benefits received, or, if laboring under misfortunes, to implore his mercy.” But, he continues, since it is the policies of the federal government which have brought misfortune to the country, it is that body that should fast and pray, not the people at large. “A good Christian” turns the national fast on its head by suggesting that individual citizens did not need to pray for the nation because “if the Nation is guilty *as a nation* it can only be so through the instruments and channels of its actions as a nation, these are evidently the members of the government and consequently it is acknowledging that the administration has to repent of *manifold sins and transgressions.*”²⁷⁷ By the time of Adams’ 1799 fastgiving, the paper had established itself as strongly against both the president and the holiday. Shortly after the 1799 proclamation had been released, a letter was published in the paper from “an old ecclesiastic.” “When I read your proclamation for a day of humiliation, fasting, and prayer,” the author began, “a question arose in my mind whether it was the duty of a gospel minister to regard your recommendation or not.” Upon careful consideration, the author decides that he cannot promote this holiday. “This may be displeasing to you,” he noted, “but it is better to incur your displeasure than to dishonor God by any hypocritical observance of the day recommended by you.”²⁷⁸ His reasons for objecting to the fast day were threefold: first, the president had no right to call

²⁷⁷ “President’s Proclamation, for the Aurora,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, March 30, 1798.

²⁷⁸ “To John Adams, President of the United States,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, April 17, 1799.

citizens to religious observance; second, the fast was displeasing to God because it was political; and third, the politics the president espoused were wrong.

The letter from the ‘old Ecclesiastic’ was reprinted in newspapers throughout New England. The *Massachusetts Mercury* published a letter in response from ‘A Real Ecclesiastic’ which argued against the ‘Old Ecclesiastic’s’ disapproval of national fast days point by point. According to the Real Ecclesiastic, the fast day was constitutional because it was not appointed, but was recommended. Besides, the writer asserted, such a day of religious observance was proper and moral; it encouraged pious behavior without “infringement of the rights of conscience of any Christian denomination or individual.”²⁷⁹ If Americans were going to remove the right to appoint such days from executives, then Massachusetts would have to give up their annual fasts and thanksgivings as well, something the writer did not think the ‘Old Ecclesiastic’ would want to do.

While the idea that the federal government had no right to proclaim days of fasting and thanksgiving had proliferated shortly after the ratification of the Constitution, few individuals offered concrete reasons for their objections until later in the decade. The *Herald of Liberty* published a series on public fasts late in the fall of 1798 after Adams’ first fastgiving day. After a detailed discussion of fasting, thanksgiving, and colonial history, the article turned to America after the passage of the Constitution. While such proclamations had frequently been called by the Continental Congress, the paper noted that “It [fast days] was indeed moved for by a member of the third Congress, but on explanation the motion was dropped; since that time, however, one thanksgiving and one fast day has been officially recommended by the executive.” These

²⁷⁹ “The Reply of a Real Ecclesiastic,” *Massachusetts Mercury*, April 16, 1799. This reply was reprinted in the *Connecticut Bee* and the *New Hampshire Gazette*.

proclamations were considered nonsense by the paper because scrupulous sects and even entire counties routinely ignored the proclamation. The absurdity of the government calling for religious observance was most clearly seen in the observance of Adams' fast which "was kept as a day of feasting and a night of riot" by federalists, was "disregarded from principles of religion; by many others, I am informed, it was disregarded on political grounds...by others it was kept with suitable intentions and in a becoming manner."²⁸⁰ After Adams' released his 1799 proclamation, *Greenleaf's New York Journal* published similar sentiments on national fast days. That paper argued that "If it is to be a national fast, it must be by the civil magistrate; and if we are to essay fasting and humiliation as a nation, our national rulers should lead in the solemn exercise...But if it is to be performed as a religious duty...then a question arises whether the civil magistrate, whose power only lies within the compass of legal and civil principles...has any authority over us as members of the church of Christ." After all, the editor pointed out, there was no national church in America and a distinct separation existed between the civil government and ecclesiastic governance. In another frequent argument against fast and thanksgiving days, the article noted the proliferation of religious denominations and the "many jarring opinions on the way in which God is propitious to us" which made a day devoted to providential theology an uncomfortable national affair.²⁸¹ While the editor acknowledged that Adams merely recommended the fast day, he quickly points out that in some states, namely in New Jersey, fast days had been commanded since the establishment of the Constitution. In his conclusion, the editor asks seriously if the civil

²⁸⁰ "Public Fasts," *Herald of Liberty* October 21, 1798.

²⁸¹ "On the President's Fast," *Greenleaf's New York Journal*, April 20, 1799.

government would take kindly to ecclesiastical leaders recommending matters of governmental policy; the obvious corollary to civil recommendations for religious actions.

Most often, Adams' proclamation was seen as a fast day and not a thanksgiving day. Those federalists who supported his proclamation hoped that the day would "make a proper impression on the mind of every American; and may the sincerity and fervency of our devotion on the approaching National Fast, be such as to be acceptable to him; who knoweth the secrets of all hearts."²⁸² The *Carlisle Gazette* noted that Wednesday the 6th of May was kept with "due solemnity and total suspension of business of every description" with fast day sermons given in both the Presbyterian and German churches in town. Moreover, the newspaper noted that far from being more disjointed and political, "the Patriotic sentiment appears general through the United States, not only by the old Patriots but the youth, their sons."²⁸³ The fast day as well as recent military exercises demonstrated the continued value American citizens placed on patriotic actions. The inhabitants of Carlisle, Pennsylvania continued to observe religious days of prayer for their country as a matter of great importance; regardless of the president who called for them or the politics he espoused.

The pulpits and newspapers of Massachusetts resounded with pleasure upon the President's fast day with very few exceptions. New England was strongly supportive of Adams and the region's long traditions of yearly fast days made those citizens especially fond of all such holidays. The *New York Gazette* reported that in Boston "From every

²⁸² *Federal Observer*, (Portsmouth, Nh.) March 21, 1799.

²⁸³ *Carlisle Gazette*, (Carlisle, Pa.) May 16, 1798.

heart the most devout supplications were offered up to the Ruler of Nations that our country might be shielded by his goodness in our hour of peril.” These sentiments were not supposed to be unanimous throughout the country, and “Foremost in these acts of devotion and praise, stood the Clergy of Massachusetts—their piety and patriotism have been long witnessed, and on this occasion it burst forth with renewed and augmented energy and intelligence.”²⁸⁴

Adams’ opponents in particular seized on the fast day as his attempt to spread the Federalist agenda. Sometimes the papers played on the popular understanding of fast days as somber and thanksgivings as jovial to degrade the 1798 celebration. The *Independent Chronicle* claimed that the holiday “had the appearance of hilarity, rather than prayer...” and emphasized the political nature of the celebration which enticed Federalists who were not church-goers to go to church because “the request of the President, it was supposed, was more binding on them than the injunctions of the supreme being.” Political divisions had been present during previous thanksgiving celebrations, most notably among the anti-federalists who objected to the Constitution during President Washington’s thanksgivings. Yet, those objections had not been about the form or function of the celebration. Instead, these objections had focused on whether the Constitution was a blessing which deserved thanks. The objections to the fast-givings in 1798 and 1799 were about how, why and for what (political) purpose the president had called the celebration.²⁸⁵ Other newspapers seized upon printers faux pas to pick at the federalist agenda. When the Newfield, Connecticut newspaper, the *American*

²⁸⁴ “Boston, May 10th the National Fast,” *New York Gazette*, May 16, 1798.

²⁸⁵ *Independent Chronicle* (Boston, Ma.), May 10-May 14, 1798.

Telegraphe, announced the national fast to be on Thursday instead of Wednesday, the New-Hampshire based *Herald of Liberty* jeered that “It is to be dreaded that *fasting* two days will produce at least some *disorder* in the stomachs of the Federalists—who are so remarkably fond of good living.”²⁸⁶

All of these editorials, descriptions, and japes were dwarfed by the physical response to Adams’ 1798 fastgiving day. In their old age, Adams wrote to Jefferson that he supposed he must have been sleeping when the mobs attacked Adams home and threatened him and his family on that April day. He claimed that “ten thousand people, and perhaps many more, were parading the streets of Philadelphia, on the evening of my Fast Day.... when I myself judged it prudent and necessary to order chests of arms from the War Office, to be brought through by lanes and back doors; determined to defend my house at the expense of my life, and the lives of the few, very few, domestics and friends within it.”²⁸⁷ The newspapers also recorded these disturbances, although even federalist papers did not record the gathering as being particularly bloodthirsty. *Porcupine’s Gazette* described the disturbance as “about twenty fellows, the greatest part of them foreigners” who had the audacity to “go into the state house yard with French cockades in their hats.” This “fracas” as the paper termed it, was joined with a threat made to the president to set fire to the city. While alarming, the paper assured its readers that “the

²⁸⁶ *Herald of Liberty* (Exeter, Nh.), April 22, 1799.

²⁸⁷ Bruce Baden, “*Ye Will Say I am no Christian*”: *The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values*, (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006,) 65. Jefferson wrote to Madison about the mob days after it happened in May of 1798. He noted then that the threat seemed valid enough, but thought that it had only been political artifice intended to stir up the people. See Jefferson to Madison, May 1798. J.C.A. Stagg, *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition*, Congressional Series, Volume 17 (31 March 1797–3 March 1801 and supplement 1778–1795.)

officers of the police interfered, and having lodged some of the disturbers of the peace in jail, the tumult subsided.”²⁸⁸

Conclusion—Where did all the National Thanksgivings Go?

Today, Americans unite once a year surrounded by images of pilgrims and turkeys while eating pumpkin pies. Thanksgiving is a national event which brings people together through a collective memory of America’s founding and shared culinary traditions. While revolutionary and early national Americans similarly joined together for food and fellowship, thanksgiving was a source of national unity not only a date set aside for remembering America’s pilgrim ancestors. The Revolution required a sense of unity to be successful and thanksgiving allowed new American citizens to join together in religious praise regardless of state, ethnicity, or denomination. Drawing on the long English tradition of thanksgiving, the revolutionaries created a powerful celebration which validated American independence while rooting their actions in tradition and religious belief. Through thanksgiving proclamations, sermons, and newspaper reports, the idea of the nation as a political and religious unit began to take root. President Washington’s 1789 thanksgiving was the zenith of this early national ideal as citizens across America gave thanks to God for the blessing of the Constitution.

In the years following this celebration, however, the national government would gradually distance itself from the religious thanksgiving holiday, to be replaced by states, cities, and denominations. While few questioned the religious devotion and patriotic feeling behind Washington’s 1789 thanksgiving, some did question the propriety of such a proclamation in a republic and the role of the federal government in calling for such

²⁸⁸ “The Fast,” *Porcupine’s Gazette* (Philadelphia, Pa.) May 10, 1798.

events. Those who questioned the effects of the Constitution on the power of the states worried that thanksgiving proclamations at the federal level were only the beginning of that government's encroachment on state responsibilities.

Political concerns were not the only reason that national thanksgivings and thanking and fasting in general became contested events. Regionalism, particularly the development of the New England thanksgiving myth made these holidays a source of internal conflict rather than unity. Thanksgiving came to define what it meant to be a New Englander and pitched that region's religious and political devotion against that of the South and Middle Atlantic. Moreover, individual denominations began to centralize their control over their congregations through thanksgiving and fast day proclamations. These denominational events could result in one person celebrating two or three thanksgivings in one season rather than one central event with the nation as the holidays central blessing. Denominations stressed the religious rather than the political obligations to give thanks and fast and stressed that these were Christian, not American duties.

As America entered into the republican period, many citizens shifted their thoughts on providential theology to envisioning God's providence as solely positive rather than a mixture of His blessings and His wrath. Many citizens believed that God had chosen America to be His chosen nation on earth and that he would not curse the nation anymore. Thus, fast days began to fall out of fashion while thanksgivings were often celebrated as days of fun, dancing, and feasting rather than as days of solemn, religious praise.

The nation was ever-present during thanksgiving. Individuals gave thanks for the blessings of the nation, prayed for its sins, and joined with fellow citizens in supplicating

God for his many mercies. The vision of America as a nation united by patriotism and religion was one of the goals of the thanksgiving celebration. President Washington and the first Congress built on this conception of the nation to draw its citizens together after the ratification of the Constitution when the blessings of God included not only the American nation but the newly strengthened federal government as well. Even in the decades after the Constitution, the tensions raised by party politics and regionalism could not remove the idea of the nation from America's thanksgiving celebrations; it continued to appear in regional squabbles over which area kept the best thanksgiving, and in the listing of blessings given in sermons and poetry.

Thanksgiving in the early national period became a holiday particularly suited to America's needs. The theology behind thanksgiving was vague enough that it was embraced regardless of Christian denomination, but still encouraged basic Christian beliefs. And, because the holiday was not a part of the liturgical calendar, local, state, and federal governments were free to appropriate the celebration as they wished. Perhaps most importantly, governmental thanksgivings suggested that a force greater than American politicians had created the nation. During the early national period, God was the ultimate unifier of America. Both the citizens and the state were called by God and his providence to recognize America's blessings. Rather than remembering the puritan founding of New England, national thanksgivings during the early national period were designed to recognize the blessings of American independence and the Constitution.

Conclusion—Mr. Madison’s Thanksgivings, Christian Witness Testimony, and the Presidential Oath

The actions of government officials in the 1790s set precedence for American political ritual over the next two centuries; thanksgivings were indelibly linked in the public imagination with national well-being, oaths were treated with sublime awe, and a certain level of Christian belief was assumed for such mundane activities as testifying in court. Yet, as the American people moved steadily into the nineteenth century, both citizens at large and politicians in particular used and manipulated these rituals for political gain. Religio-political rituals like days of thanksgiving and oaths became increasingly detached from their Christian religious context and instead connected to the growing civil religion that supported American nationalism.

This shift was particularly evident in James Madison’s calls for thanksgivings during the War of 1812. Unlike Washington’s thanksgiving proclamations, President Madison’s thanksgivings were not unifying events. And where John Adams had long advocated for thanksgiving and fast days, Madison had been skeptical of both their constitutionality and effectiveness. While the thanksgivings of 1814 and 1815 were not proclaimed without cause—both were intended to thank God for his blessings during what might have been a disastrous war, they were proclaimed especially to rally American citizens around the beleaguered federal government. President Madison’s 1815 proclamation focused almost exclusively on the blessings “the Great Disposer of

events” had bestowed on America’s federal government. The proclamation ascribes to God’s providence not only American independence, but also the Constitution. By scripting the war as the conclusion of God’s providence in creating a blessed America separate from Great Britain, Madison also asserted that this divisive war had God’s blessing.

Mr. Madison’s thanksgivings also flouted traditional convention about when thanksgivings should occur. Fast days typically occurred during the spring while thanksgivings were an autumn occurrence. The national thanksgiving of 1814 occurred on Thursday, January 12th while the thanksgiving of 1815 was held on April 13th. The 1815 thanksgiving fell, uncomfortably, on the same day as New Hampshire’s annual fast. An article reprinted several times argued that the solution would be to “Fast in the forenoon, and feast in the afternoon.” Tradition had been left behind, according to these New Englanders. The *Vermont Republican* noted the clashing religious celebrations, but said that those who opposed Mr. Madison’s peace should “fast in sackcloth and ashes; but let the real friends of peace...keep that as a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing.” The *New-Hampshire Gazette* asserted that although the conflict was unfortunate, and untraditional, the many blessings given by God made thanksgiving appropriate at the time.²⁸⁹

Republicans widely approved of the action and Republican newspapers reported thanksgiving sermons and sober religious behavior while Federalists deplored the action

²⁸⁹ “Thanksgiving and Fasting” *Northern Post* (Salem, Ny.), April 6th, 1815. This item was reprinted by the *Rutland (Vt.) Herald*, *Bennington (Vt.) News-Letter* and others; *Vermont Republican* (Windsor), April 4th, 1815; *New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), March 21st 1815.

and reported on the thanksgiving as a farce or sham. One such widely reprinted newspaper article reported on what President Madison would have liked to feast upon at his thanksgiving table saying that “Plums and poultry being scarce at this season, our Democrats kept a grand carnival and carousal by feasting upon...Four and Twenty impressed seamen baked in a pye—Four and Twenty do. Fricasseed...Gen. Winchester hashed “in style”—tough enough--...50 Virginia kidnapped Blacks—made into soup—like the black broth of the Lacedemonians--...”²⁹⁰ President Madison, according to this article, perverted the thanksgiving by engaging in an unnecessary war and by prizing bloodshed over peace. The traditional thanksgiving meal was obscenely changed to suit the warmongering ways of the national government. Undoubtedly, many citizens continued to celebrate local thanksgivings as an important aspect of their liturgical year or of their theology, but party politics dominated the discussions of this national event.

In 1815, the year of Mr. Madison’s final national thanksgiving was also the year Henry Bliss published his poem, *Thanksgiving, a poem in two parts*. One part was a reflection on the celebration of thanksgiving while the other was a commentary on contemporary politics. Bliss artfully outlined how thanksgiving was seen in the early national period and presented the tensions which would keep thanksgiving from becoming a permanent feature of the national government for almost fifty years. This poem deserves careful consideration for these reasons and because the sharp critique of the contemporary scene points to the changes wrought by party factions, a diverse citizenry, and the changing relationship between church and state.

²⁹⁰ “Salem April 18th” *Hallowell* (Hallowell, Maine) *Gazette*, April 26th 1815.

Bliss's poem was a product of New England regionalism and made thanksgiving a creation of New England rather than a European religious celebration. Here we see Thanksgiving as a commemoration of 1621 rather than thanksgiving as a national recognition of God's providence. Bliss did not deny that other regions participated in the thanksgiving celebration, but for Bliss their participation was often corruptive. He stated that "half the follies which the year brings forth, / Ride on its crazy wings from *South* to *North*..."²⁹¹ New England won pride of place in this poem, with the totality of America pulling sainted New England into the nation's sins and sharing in the God-given grace still touted by Bliss' covenant theology.

Religion or the lack thereof, was one of Bliss's targets in this poem. Thanksgiving was first and foremost a religious celebration and Bliss took special care to describe a thanksgiving service in 1815. He observed that "Some go for news, and some to learn the price / Of beef and cheese, or when the'll have a rise; / Some go to hear the Parson preach and pray, / Some find no faith in what he has to say..." None of these accusations was novel at the time, nor was it considered a stunning lapse of faith to attend church for less than pious reasons, but such pointed commentary on the Sabbath reflects a wider fear that America's citizens were gradually slipping into secularism—a fear which could be confirmed as the government moved farther away from religious proclamations such as thanksgiving. Bliss ended part one of the poem, the description of a thanksgiving day, with a reminder of the special covenant God had made with his American children. Covenant theology was the thread connecting all American thanksgivings and Bliss

²⁹¹ Henry Bliss, *Thanksgiving a poem in two parts* (Pittsfield, Ma.: Printed by Phinehas Allen, 1815), 3.

recognized the ubiquitous nature of God's promise since, "Twas God himself, omnipotent and kind, / Our favored land for Liberty designed, / Here taught each patriot sage the liberal plan, / Here wak'd the noblest energies of man."²⁹² Throughout his poem, Bliss linked the celebration of thanksgiving with the God-ordained creation of the American republic and reinforced the idea that good American citizens recognized God's role in the nation.

Part two of the poem dealt with the political aspect of thanksgiving. Bliss segued from the folly of deists to the folly of party politics as if the connection between the two was obvious. In another nod towards New England's supremacy, he noted that America's "ancestors" were the Puritans and that their pious ways had been lost in both the church and the state. Thanksgiving had lost its force not only because of America's lacking religiosity but because of the machinations of the political system. Particularly, he deplored the factionalism present during the War of 1812 which saw New England itself divided over its continued involvement with the American nation, illustrated at the Hartford Convention. Bliss himself supported the war and mused that "Thy Freeborn Sons, America, shall smart, / While Faction's voice the Righteous War deplores..." From this point to the poem's end, Bliss recounted America's victories in the recent war and the innocent, American blood that had been spilled, while he again pressed at the need for God's presence in America's government. "Thy glorious arm preserv'd Columbia's fate, / And rocked the cradle of her infant state," Bliss concluded with a message befitting a thanksgiving poem which stressed God's blessing, deplored

²⁹² Ibid, 5; Ibid, 11.

America's sins despite its special relationship with God, and finally argued for America's contrition in the face of such undeserved abundance.²⁹³

Henry Bliss looked longingly for a peaceful future in a pious, and thus successful, country. He saw the early national period as a time of faction and degeneracy which threatened God's special promise to America. Above all, he questioned the increasing secularity of the national government and bemoaned that sacred days such as thanksgiving were given over to merrymaking and secular pastimes. It is understandable that Bliss would look back at the late eighteenth century for the epitome of a Christian republic because Christian belief was still tightly enmeshed with political action at that point. In the decades following the establishment of the Constitution, Americans slowly ceased to consider the federal government the agent of national religious piety and turned towards the denominations and religious leaders for this function.

Despite this separation between the state and religious ritual, threads of Christian belief remained in the federal government for years to come. Throughout the nineteenth century, witnesses' Christian belief was often under scrutiny. In a New York case in 1820, *Tuttle v. Gridley*, a witness was disqualified for his atheistic beliefs.²⁹⁴ Chief Justice of the New York Appellate court, Ambrose Spencer, noted that while religious tolerance was one of the underpinnings of the nation, and each man should be free to his own conscience, "no testimony is entitled to credit, unless delivered under the solemnity of the oath which comes home to the conscience of the witness, and will create a tie arising from his belief that false swearing would expose him to punishment in the

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 16, 24.

²⁹⁴ New York, Jackson, ex. Dem. *Tuttle v. Gridley*, 18 Johns. 98 (N.Y. 1820)

life to come. On this great principle rest all our institutions, and especially the distribution of justice between man and man.”²⁹⁵ Chief Justice Spencer argued that an individual’s religious beliefs were his own unless made public and then publicly questioned. When a citizen was summoned to serve the nation as a witness, his religious beliefs of necessity became public knowledge. And, if that witness espoused heterodox religious beliefs or no belief at all, then the religious obligations of an oath prevented such a man from participation in the judicial process. In other words, irreligion was an impediment to good citizenship. Other courts in the early eighteenth century followed their own logic about the oaths of atheists and those of other religions, often allowing religious individuals (such as Jews, Buddhists, or Muslims) to swear but disallowing the vocal atheist. By 1848, in the decision made by a Massachusetts court in the *Thurston V. Whitney* case, judicial sentiments about the promissory oaths of witnesses had shifted. This case and others emphasized that it was a witness’ belief in the binding nature of an oath, not his religious beliefs that were of most concern to the court. Until 1939, however, at least five states and Washington D.C. restricted witness testimony to those who were at least nominally Christian. Missouri statutes changed in that year, assuring residents that “Every person, believing in any other than the Christian religion, shall be sworn according to the peculiar ceremonies of his religion, if there be any such ceremonies.”²⁹⁶ While this statute gives non-Christians the ability to be sworn in as

²⁹⁵ Wesley J. Cambell, “Religious Neutrality in the Early Republic,” *Regent University Law Review* Vol. 24, (2011-2012), pg. 330

²⁹⁶ Missouri, 492.050. (RSMo 1939 § 1883) Prior revisions: 1929 § 1719; 1919 § 5406; 1909 § 6350.

witnesses, it also makes clear that “ceremony” in the sense of ritual form was expected to be a part of the oath-taking process.

The presidential oath of office also continues to attract religious tensions. The general assumption among the American people is that every president since George Washington has added the phrase, “So help me, God” to their oath; an assertion that is impossible to prove, but which also demonstrates the continued belief that to be an American president is to embrace the Christian faith. The establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday in 1864 furthered the association between Christianity and American political life as the president puts forth a Thanksgiving Proclamation which always connects national good fortune with the approval of a Supreme Being.

America’s present religio-political world is not a static reproduction of the rituals popular in the late eighteenth century. Nor were these rituals unchanging in the turbulent years between the revolution and the early republic; they were constantly negotiated, manipulated, and reinvented to better represent the American people and the goals of a new, republican society. 1789 solidified America’s democratic form of government and the constant balance of powers between federal and state governments as well as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. It also reinforced the role religion would play in this new nation through oaths and thanksgivings, but not fast days. The citizens of this new nation would be bound together by promises made before God and country, and they would celebrate the blessings of America in mutual prayer and thanksgiving, but they would not fall on their knees in repentance as John Adams had envisioned in 1774. The federal government would accept the service of Jews, Muslims and perhaps even atheists much to the chagrin of anti-federalists and pious Christians throughout the

nation, yet Christian belief would remain deeply enmeshed in civic duty.

Denominational difference would be dampened at both the federal and the state level unless the beliefs of a sect fell outside mainstream Protestant thought. Kneeling and swearing, raising one's hand towards heaven, even solemnly affirming an oath were all acceptable oath rituals, yet the non-observance of a thanksgiving holiday continued to mark Quakers as deviant and perhaps even questionable citizens. These rituals, thanksgiving, fasting, and oaths, would continue to define American citizenship and encourage public acknowledgment of God and his role in America.

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