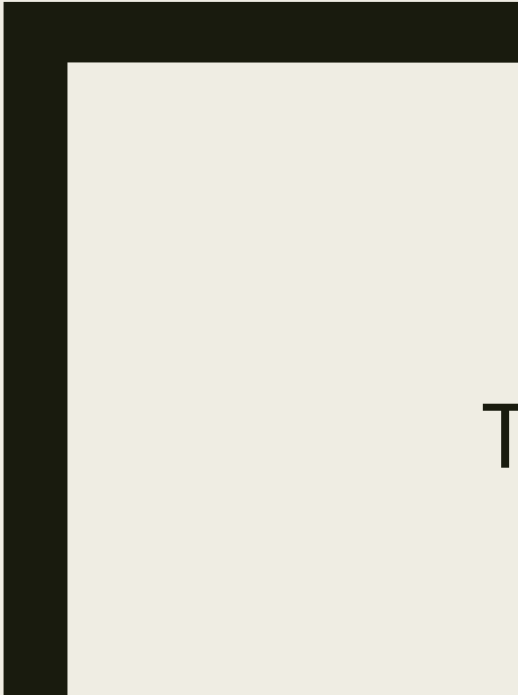




CIVIL RELIGION & THE RATIFICATION

Presented by Margaret Flamingo
Center for the Study of the American Constitution
April 6th, 2018

Civil Religion

- “Civil Religion in America,” Robert Bellah, 1967
 - *Sparked a scholarly movement*
- “the navel-gazing has been eye-crossingly metaphysical in nature”
~Andrew M. Manis
- By any other name:
 - *Civic faith*
 - *Religious nationalism*
 - *Public:*
 - Religion*
 - Piety*
 - Philosophy*
 - Theology*

Civil Religion

- "the mythos and rhetoric of nation-building that constitute a schema of values which in turn guides decision making."

~Craig Smith

- The nation as "sacred"
 - *Beliefs, myths, and symbols*
 - *Ceremonies and rituals*
 - *Days of remembrance and thanksgiving*
- "Civil religion can be best understood as a cultural blending of religion and patriotism that interprets the nation as unique by virtue of its special relationship with that society's conception of the sacred."

~Andrew Manis

Civil Religion

- How does it function?
- How is it visible?
- What common language does it share?
- What traditions does it draw from?

Colonial Legacy



- “First” Founders
 - “*City on a Hill*”
- Covenant Theology
 - *Generational Conditions*
- The Jeremiad and the Political Sermons of the 18th century

DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN THE RATIFICATION PROCESS

THE CONVENTION

“The real wonder is that so many difficulties should have been surmounted, and surmounted with a unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected. It is impossible for any man of candor to reflect on this circumstance without partaking of the astonishment. It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a **finger of that Almighty** hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the **critical stages of the revolution**.

– Publius [James Madison], *Federalist* 37

DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN THE RATIFICATION PROCESS

THE STATES

Benjamin Rush, Pennsylvania

“... fairly deduced it from heaven...”

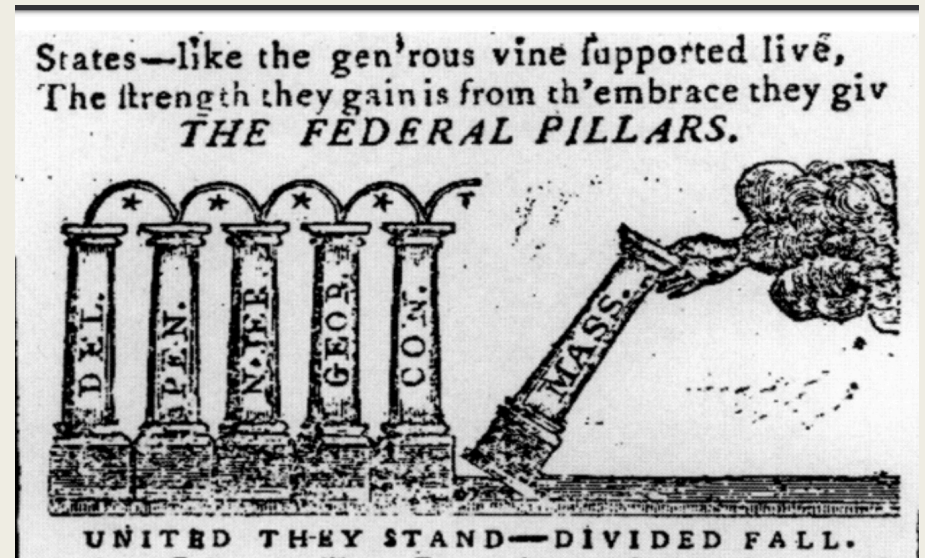
12 December 1787

Cæsar II, New York

“Whether the New Constitution, if adopted, will prove adequate to such desirable ends, time, the mother of events must shew. For my own part, I sincerely esteem it a system, which, without the finger of *God*, never could have been suggested and agreed upon by such a diversity of interests.”

17 October 1787

DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN THE RATIFICATION PROCESS



DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN THE RATIFICATION PROCESS

“... The plot thickens fast. A few short weeks will determine the political fate of America for the present generation and probably produce no small influence on the happiness of society ... I will confess to you sincerely, my dear Marquis; it will be so much beyond any thing we had a right to imagine or expect eighteen months ago, that it will demonstrate as visibly the finger of Providence, as any possible event in the course of human affairs can ever designate it....”

George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette,
28 May 1788

Fear of British Domination

‘The voice here ceased to utter. I pondered upon the substance of this invisible declaration. I beat my breast, which, with unutterable pangs, was bursting. I reflected that the plan was altogether consistent with the character of *man* in his depraved state. I therefore, at that period, stepped forward to warn Americans, *to be vigilant—to be virtuous—to be honorable—for these three are immaculate, uncorruptible—pleasing to the god of nature*. Americans have not regarded my call of affection—and the *plan*, by the voice from the east, is fast ripening. You are infested with corruption, and list not whence it proceeds.—it proceeds from the british cabinet!—rebellion already stalks in *Massachusetts; Vermont* may favor them. The period of the prophecy is not yet fulfilled—but, if ye cannot trace the *natural* course of events; if ye cannot, in some measure, determine by the effects *what* the causes were, and counteract, by immediate recourse to *vigilance, virtue, honor, justice*, and thus undermine every plot which is aimed at your INDEPENDENCE—VERMONT, CANADA, the INDIAN NATIONS, &c. will join their forces to the monster REBELLION, and drive you head-long, into the pit of POLITICAL DAMNATION.”

AMERICANS! believe not in the *delusive* doctrine of *predestination!* the day of grace is not passed—for, ye have POWER OF REFORMATION!—make your FÆDERAL HEAD adequate to the *requisite* purposes of government;—give permanency to your laws;—hurl from your bosoms, *ye several legislatures*, all sycophantish members! and those who are swayed by the dangerous principles of self-interest, or the interest of any particular state which may effect a disunion of the whole!—then, and not till then, will you be safe—then the storms and tempests of differing nations shall attempt, *in vain*, to annoy you—and your INDEPENDENCE and HAPPINESS will be established for ever.

Americanus, 15 March 1787

NEW HAMPSHIRE AND THE “CONCERT OF PRAYER”

“In the time of our late distress, when the sword of a powerful nation was drawn against us, we made our solemn appeal to the righteous Governor of the universe, and thousands were daily lifting up holy hands to the prayer-hearing God, to arise and plead our righteous cause; and He was graciously pleased to hear and save us in such a manner, that none but atheists could deny it to be the Lord’s doing, and to be marvellous! Nations afar off were struck with astonishment at it, and said, ‘the Lord hath done great things for America.’”

~An Association of Christian Ministers, c.
October 1787

NEW HAMPSHIRE: Proclamation of Prayer and Fasting

“...Grant to the Members of our Convention,
that Wisdom, which is necessary to direct, and
lead them into those measures which may
promote the Interest and Happiness of the
United States....”

~President John Sullivan, 29 February 1788

RELIGIOUS RHETORIC AND THE CONSTITUTION

- “It is ardently to be wished, writes a correspondent, that the little nest of villains, who inhabit the petty territory of R. I. may not have the grace to accept of the CONSTITUTION—that boon from heaven.”
Massachusetts Centinel, 26 April 1788 (RCS:R.I., 257)
- “On the other hand should she accept the heavenly manna, her decision will be enstamped on the page of time.”
Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal, 21 May 1788 (RCS:Va., 831)
- “The new constitution therefore is cast out of that state (to use the strong expression of the prophet) as a menstruous cloth.”
Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 1 May 1788 (RCS:R.I., 237)
- “that it is the Tree of Life, whose Fruit will enthrone this western Empire high among the Nations, and raise the firmest and fairest Temple to LIBERTY, that has ever yet dignified this Globe.”
Virginia Independent Chronicle, 26 September 1787 (RCS:Va., 19)
- “The Fœderal Constitution, like our holy religion, knows no invidious distinctions.”
Americanus II, *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, 19 December 1787 (RCS:Va., 247)
- “he [George Washington] looks up to it as the rock of our political salvation.”
Tobias Lear to William Prescott, Jr., Mount Vernon, 4 March 1788 (RCS:Va., 456)
- “Should it however fail in the first instance I hope it will prove a Rock of Salvation on which we may rest in our career to that fatal extreme.”
Archibald Stuart to James Madison, Richmond, 9 November 1787 (RCS:Va., 148)
- “this sacred palladium that can effectually secure us and our posterity from the odious tyranny of an aristocratic government.”
A Delegate Who Has Caught Cold, *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, 25 June 1788 (RCS:Va., 1684)
- “that it is the Tree of Life, whose Fruit will enthrone this western Empire high among the Nations, and raise the firmest and fairest Temple to LIBERTY, that has ever yet dignified this Globe.”
Virginia Independent Chronicle, 26 September 1787 (RCS:Va., 19)

CELEBRATING THE CONSTITUTION

Our Liberty Tree: A Federal Song, *Massachusetts Centinel*, 29 December 1787

In a chariot of light, from the regions of day,
The Goddess of Liberty came,
Ten thousand celestials directed her way,
And hither conducted the dame:
A fair budding branch from the gardens above,
Where millions with millions agree,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
And the plant she nam'd Liberty Tree.
This blooming exotick stuck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourish'd and bore,
The fame of its fruits drew the nations around,
To seek out this peaceable shore.
But, Americans, hear—'tis a tale most prophane,
How a wicked assemblage of powers—
Riot, Discord and Britain are uniting amain,
To cut down this garden of ours.
Then from east to the west let our Patriots convene,
Determin'd their country to free,
Our Constitution confirm—it firmly shall fix,
Its idol—our Liberty Tree.

Cite as: *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

GEORGE WASHINGTON AS SAVIOR

On the coming of the AMERICAN FABIVS to the Federal Convention in May next.

*Had not great Cromwell aim'd to gain a crown,
Unsuilied tales would hand his mem'ry down.*

The hero comes, each voice resound his praise
No envious shafts can dare to chill his rays;
All hail! great man! who for thy country's cause,
Flew at her call for to protect the laws.
But while dull notes like these my song disarm'd,
His rigid virtues ev'ry patriot warm'd;
Inspir'd each leader at his standard met,
Laurens who fell, with *Greene* and *La Fayette*.
Like the fair structure on the river side,
Which from reflection dazzles on the tide,
Each caught the flame, celestial pow'rs unite,
And stimulate them on to aid the fight.
He fought, he won, and calm'd the raging storm,
Tho' rais'd by pride abstruse, in fury's form;
Thy unambitious steps will paint thy name
To future ages thro' historic fame.
Columbia now with independence crown'd,
Proclaims her consequence on foreign ground.
For, oh! great WASHINGTON! while war did rage,
From *Clinton* retrospectively to *Gage*,
Stood firm—till peace did crown thy native shore,
By superceding war's terrific roar.

A time of rest at length appear'd in view,
With all its happiness in blooming hue;
A calm which oft the hero wish'd to see,
Where rural blessings with his mind agree;
But fly once more the *Senate* house to grace,
And crown the States with everlasting peace.

ALEXIS.

Philadelphia, April 6, 1787.

Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 9 April 1787

THE SACRED MEMORY OF THE FOUNDING

- George Washington as Savior
- The Declaration and Constitution as sacred texts
- The Seal and Flag as sacred symbols
- The religious nationalism of 19th century historians

Civil Religion as a Framework

- *Civil religion as a tool of objective study*
 - *Not limited to Christian influence*
 - *Change over time*
 - *A means of examining how traditionally marginalized groups identified with America and engaged with or re-imagined civil religion accordingly*