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New Book Examines Faith of Each American President From Washington to Obama

In their new book *The Presidents and Their Faith* (Russell Media, \$22.99 hardcover, February 2012), authors Darrin Grinder and Steve Shaw survey the religious beliefs of the men who have served as the nation's Commander in Chief. On the eve of another presidential election, it's a timely look at how religion and politics have intersected ever since the nation's founding.

Though the U.S. Constitution prohibits any religious test for political office, there seems to be a religious litmus test for the presidency, the authors find: "no serious candidate for the White House can run the risk of violating the norm that one be religious. The candidate should be not just religious, but acceptably religious." All of the presidents have spoken of—and most claimed to have spoken to—a higher power of some sort, and almost all have quoted from or claimed to read the Bible, though none made a particular study of theology. "Most presidents reflect what de Tocqueville concluded about Americans in the early 19th century: we embrace religion and keep theology at arm's length," Grinder and Shaw say.

The authors attempt to show the complexities of each man's faith, noting: "no president seems to be just one thing." The presidents come from varied backgrounds, but except for the lone Catholic, John F. Kennedy, all have been Protestant. The most unusual religious upbringing is that of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was raised a Jehovah's Witness—a sect that forbids its members to serve in the military or take oaths of office.

The presidents range from the publicly devout, such as Jimmy Carter; to the freethinking Thomas Jefferson; to those who kept silent about their private faith, such as Calvin Coolidge. Presidential faith controversies have been with us all along: Jefferson was called an "arch infidel"; William Taft, the country's last Unitarian president, faced allegations of heresy during the 1908 campaign; and Kennedy was suspected of being a Vatican agent.

Some of the book's vignettes of presidential faith include:

- At the nation's founding, Northeast Presbyterians demanded explicit mention of Jesus in the Constitution. George Washington refused, saying that religious piety "was a matter best left between an individual and his God; religious instruction was the responsibility of religious societies, not the civil state."

- An exasperated FDR commented about his faith: "I can do almost everything in the 'Gold-fish Bowl' of the President's life, but I'll be hanged if I can say my prayers in it. It bothers me to feel like something in the zoo being looked at by all the tourists in Washington when I go to church."

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•The strange prayer of Harry S Truman, offered upon America's development of the atom bomb: "We pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes."

While the presidents were often reserved about religious matters, at least to the public, their diaries and conversations show many of them were thoughtful about faith. Regardless of their personal beliefs, most were devoted to the principle of religious freedom. Many of them shared a public record of religious discourse that referred to a civil religion, to a god who is in some sort of control but not a god of personal relationship.

Grinder and Shaw consider how a president's faith might have influenced his handling of the country's affairs. They highlight some of the issues that may have caused them to grapple with their beliefs—or not—including slavery; the forced removal of Native Americans from their lands; intervention abroad; the building of, and eventual use of, atomic weapons; and the challenges of new religions, such as the rise of the Mormon Church in the 19th century. Some of these matters present terrible conflicts, such as for the several presidents who were self-professed Christians and slaveholders, or Andrew Jackson, whose words and deeds in regard to Native Americans were genocidal.

The Presidents & Their Faith casts an insightful spotlight on the unique mix of politics and religion in America.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF *THE PRESIDENTS & THEIR FAITH*:

Darrin Grinder is Chair of the English Department at Northwest Nazarene University and Associate Professor of American Literature. He has a Doctorate of Arts in English from Idaho State University. He and his wife attend Cathedral of the Rockies United Methodist Church in Boise, Idaho.

Steve Shaw is Professor of Political Science and Director of the University Honors Program at Northwest Nazarene University. He holds the PhD degree in Political Science from the University of Oklahoma. He has taught at NNU since 1979, and he and his wife attend Holy Apostles Catholic Church in Meridian, Idaho.

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