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As God Gives Me to See the Right: Gerald Ford, Religion, and Healing after Vietnam and Watergate



by David Veenstra

In history's light, August 9, 1974, was the moment when Watergate, along with the interminable debate over American involvement in Vietnam, ended. Gerald Ford took over the nation's highest office, replacing the dirty tricks and heavy-handed wielding of power of Richard Nixon's term with such uncomplicated virtues as integrity and steadiness. Journalists and politicians alike lauded his unassuming character and ethics, hoping his would be a healing presidency, if for nothing else, proving simply that the Nixon experience need not be the presidential norm. Ford, a longtime

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congressman who had been appointed to the vice presidency just nine months earlier, described the moment as a catharsis: "Our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men." Then he added, "Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy."¹

Forty years later, views of that moment and of his presidency persist: after years of convoluted politics and deceit, the nation had an opportunity to catch its breath under the calm even if uninspiring leadership of Gerald Ford. In the absence of any major domestic upheaval—save for the political backlash following the pardon of Nixon—coupled with few policy initiatives, historians have largely focused on Ford's personality, dealings with congress, and management styles and have accepted his presidency as an interregnum that allowed the nation to refocus its gaze from Washington, D.C. What has often been overlooked is the way Ford's religious beliefs and practices differed from those of Nixon, offered a unique discourse for presidential action, and helped move the nation beyond Watergate and Vietnam.

Ford was, as one historian observed, "easily the most active Christian to reside in the White House since Woodrow Wilson."² He came to his religious

convictions organically. Ford had grown up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was dominated by Dutch immigrants and Calvinist theology. By the 1930s and 1940s, the community had come to emphasize not only personal piety but also a religious understanding of the limited state known as “sphere sovereignty,” a product of the Dutch

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Calvinist revival, launched by Abraham Kuyper in the late nineteenth century, “which allowed for greater optimism and government cooperation in areas of mutual concern, such as welfare and education.”³ Ford, though largely from English ancestry and raised Episcopalian, fit well in this culture; for twenty five years, he received better than 60 percent of the vote for reelection to the House of Representatives.⁴ His parents had met at Grace Episcopal church, which they attended weekly, and raised him in “an atmosphere of personal prayer, belief in God and the Bible.” At a young age, he memorized Proverbs 3:5-6, which reads, “*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.*” Throughout his life he repeated this daily.⁵

Religion remained intrinsic to Ford’s outlook as his life became public, though he consciously kept his activities with organized religion private. As a congressman, he, with his family, attended services weekly at Immanuel-on-the-Hill in Alexandria, Virginia, where Ford served as an usher and occasionally a lay reader.⁶ He also worked on a program with his parish to provide government-assisted fair housing to local residents and services to low-income families, supported providing tuition vouchers for the parents of children who attended parochial schools, and led an issue-discussion group on Capitol Hill with members of local congregations. Perhaps more striking,

Ford met regularly for prayer with John Rhodes, Albert Quie, and Melvin Laird from 1967-1974. But when reporters asked him about the prayer meetings, Ford insisted that they were “a very quiet, much off-the-record group.”⁷ His aide explained, he “doesn’t like to wear his religion on his sleeve” because, he worried, “many people get the idea that if you say you have religious beliefs, you somehow think you’re perfect.”⁸ At the same time, he also made it a point shortly before Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in 1959 to suggest to the State Department that President Eisenhower take Khrushchev to church services. “The Communist leader could never understand the American people, he said, unless he saw them at worship in an expression of their religious faith.”⁹

Ford’s choice to keep his faith private contrasted with the increasing political religiosity during the Cold War—what sociologist Robert Bellah described as American “civil religion,” combining Judeo-Christian beliefs with a reverence for the American state into an abstract belief of a “nation under God.”¹⁰ President Eisenhower promoted this kind of civil religion, hosting the first Presidential Prayer Breakfast and overseeing the words “in God we trust” added to the Pledge of Allegiance.¹¹ His immediate successors emulated him. During the Vietnam War, however, questions of an innate national righteousness eventually challenged these traditional values, creating a fragmented pluralism that seemingly precluded moral consensus. It appeared, as novelist John Updike said, “God had taken away his blessing from the United States.”¹²

After a narrowly won election in 1968, Richard Nixon perpetuated a permanent public relations campaign to build support—including merchandizing religiosity and increasingly using this as a wedge. At his inauguration, he amplified the religious tradition of the coronation by asking clergy representing Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox traditions to offer prayers. Nearby, administration officials conducted a full-scale ecumenical service in the West Auditorium of the State Department. “Never before,” as Chaplain of Princeton University Charles Henderson observed, “had so much prayer been

invoked to place the nation's chief of state in office."¹³ Then, on Sunday, Nixon instituted regular worship services in the East Room of the White House for about two hundred invited guests. Previous presidents had held services on special occasions, but the weekly worship was a White House first. The president and his family selected the pastor. Then, acting in the role of worship leader, he opened the service and sat down on the front row.¹⁴ Nixon answered concerns about the appropriateness of these services by asking the question "What better example could there be than to bring the worship service, with all its solemn meaning, right into the White House?"¹⁵ But, as historians Richard Pierard and Robert Linder argued, the worship services also constituted "a 'conforming' or 'established' religion," with Nixon serving as the titular head.¹⁶ Reporters and politicians also wondered about the "rotating company of prelates, evangelists and rabbis, many seemingly more interested in matters of politics than of the spirit"; White House papers later confirmed the dual-purpose: An ACTION memo of February 1970 urged proceeding with the "President's request that you develop a list of rich people with strong religious interest to be invited to the White House church service."¹⁷ Another document insisted that staffers "limit the invitation to the Chairman or to an appointee [of a regulatory commission] we [are] working on for a specific purpose."¹⁸

In his public activities, Nixon applied the church's vocabulary "not to a transcendental God, but to his own nation, and worse, to his own vision of what that nation should be."¹⁹ For example, shortly before embarking on his historic trip to China, he beseeched the nation that "as these journeys take place, will you pray primarily that this Nation, under God, in the person of its President, will, to the best of our ability, be on God's side."²⁰ He also collaborated regularly with Billy Graham, the nation's most prominent evangelist, enlarging his role as worship leader for a national stage. In May 1970, just days after the killing of four students on the campus of Kent State University during a protest against the Vietnam War, Nixon gave a patriotic speech at the Youth Night portion of Graham's Crusade in Knoxville,

Tennessee, becoming the first president to ever address a religious crusade. As the choir sang "How Great Thou Art," Nixon and Graham strode together across the stage.²¹ Then, tying church activity and partisan politics together, Graham introduced the president, saying, "I'm for change—but the Bible teaches us to obey authority."²² Dissent against national politics in this conflation became un-American and un-Christian.

Watergate ultimately revealed the lengths that Nixon would travel to guarantee votes. It also showed that the religious rhetoric was connected more closely to partisan action than to any sincere beliefs. The regular White House worship services ceased just days after Watergate burglar James McCord began testifying to the Federal Grand Jury about the administration's involvement in the break-in. Betrayed by Watergate's revelations, a congressman, when asked about Ford's religious views, quickly cautioned, "Let's not make the same mistake we made with President Nixon."²³

When Ford took office, public support for the presidency and the Republican Party had eroded to 24 percent.²⁴ Acutely aware of his position as an unelected president, Ford pledged to be "President of all the people" and asked the public, "confirm me as your President with your prayers." Unlike Nixon, who genuinely wanted to realign the Republican Party along conservative lines, Ford—having been neither elected as vice president or president—hoped to govern above partisan divides by bridging the gaps that had widened around the White House and by basing his proposals on moral claims with religious underpinnings, in the hope of bringing together political moderates.

Ford immediately reconnected the presidency with various constituencies, including congress, and halted the practice of holding worship services in the White House. The *New York Times* hailed this a "welcome change" because "Love of God and country will be more secure under leaders who do not wear patriotism in their lapels or religion on their sleeves."²⁵ In place of the worship services, administration aides regularly held voluntary prayer meetings in the White House, which the president occasionally attended.²⁶ James Reston of the *New York Times* wrote, "He

is everything Richard Nixon pretended to be. For him, religion is not a role but a reality; he doesn't fake it but lives by it."²⁷

After acknowledging, during his swearing-in ceremony, a power higher than the laws of men, Ford explained—in language reflecting his personal faith—his solutions to the two issues that hung most heavily over the public conscience. For example, ten days after assuming office, Ford addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Chicago and announced his intention to introduce a plan of limited amnesty for Vietnam-era draft evaders. Using words from Psalm 23, he explained his rationale, saying, “I ask all Americans who ever asked for goodness and mercy in their lives, who ever sought forgiveness for trespasses, to join in rehabilitating all the casualties of all the tragic conflicts that passed.”²⁸ His plan, which called for community-based panels to hear individual cases and allowed evaders to “earn their way or work their way back,” took a middle-of-the-road approach—something between complete amnesty and full prosecution.²⁹ His announcement received only a lukewarm response. Conscientious objectors, many of whom had invoked the same “higher law,” questioned the doctrine. Others wondered out loud about the details and feasibility of the plan. But the approach was clear: Ford based his policy of forgiveness on the Biblical requirement for forgiveness. Three weeks later, he elaborated on the same theme.

On Sunday, September 8, after attending the early service at St. John's Episcopal Church, Ford addressed the nation from the White House at eleven o'clock Eastern Time, announcing that he was granting a “full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he...has committed or may have committed.” There were many reasons for the pardon, including the possibility of a prolonged trial and even Nixon's deteriorating health. But Ford framed his decision in largely personal religious terms, speaking explicitly of the higher power he mentioned at his swearing-in: “I have promised to uphold the Constitution, to do what is right as God gives me to see the right... . The Constitution is the supreme law of our land and it governs our actions as citizens. Only the laws of

God, which govern our consciences, are superior to it.” He then added, “I do believe, with all my heart and mind and spirit, that I, not as president but as a humble servant of God, will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy.”³⁰

Ford's statements were, as a journalist later wrote, “extraordinary [,...]linking his own fate beyond time to his actions within time.”³¹ The president believed that faith was personal and should be the guiding force behind his action. But he also insisted that it not be a tool for partisan support and, in that view, adhered strongly to the principle of separation of church and state.

During the two and a half years that followed, Ford backed away from making civil-religious gestures, maintaining that his faith remain private.³² He met with Billy Graham on several occasions, but when the evangelist invited him to address his 1974 Crusade in Norfolk, Virginia, Ford declined.³³

At the same time, Ford also continued to promote policies that reflected his religious views,

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including partnership between the spheres of church and state. He saw “nothing wrong with a cooperative relationship between government and religious institutions,” provided it did not show favoritism.³⁴ When the White House launched the ill-fated Whip Inflation Now program, it called on individuals and cooperative institutions, including churches, to participate in regulating the economy.³⁵ Ford also supported aid to private schools. When he was asked about a series of Supreme Court rulings restricting various public fundings for private and church-sponsored

schools, the president expressed disappointment and said he hoped a “constitutional way” could be found to help these schools.³⁶

Throughout his presidency, Ford’s approval ratings hovered around 50 percent, having dropped from his pre-Nixon-pardon ratings of above 70 percent. But the public remained far less suspicious of Ford than they were of Nixon. Although Ford’s faith was never hidden, he used his ethics rather than religiosity to convince people of his trustworthiness. Ford had tried to distinguish his presidency from his predecessor’s by infusing, into his rhetoric and policies, a common-sense moral philosophy of honesty and decency that *reflected* his religious and national convictions but that, importantly, did not equate expressions of religiousness or nationalism with support for his platform.

It was only in the 1976 presidential campaign, which pitted Ford against Jimmy Carter—arguably the most unabashed religious politician to seek the presidency since William Jennings Bryan—that Ford began to discuss his religious views openly. Carter overcame an early reticence to discuss his personal religion and began regularly describing himself as a “born-again Christian Baptist Sunday school teacher deacon.”³⁷ Ford’s supporters saw it as a contest “between two born-again Christians—but only one was willing to run as one.”³⁸ Throughout the election, Ford’s aides urged him to court the religious vote more openly. One staff member wrote, “the campaign is an ideal time to make some inroads into the religious ballpark, as was done in the Nixon campaign.”³⁹ And the authors of his campaign strategy handbook listed Billy Graham as one of “Our ‘Attack’ Resources.”⁴⁰ Trailing in the polls in September, and with only a few weeks left to go in the campaign, Ford made last-minute appeals for the religious votes: He spoke openly about being a man of faith, and he contacted Billy Graham, asking if the offer to speak at a crusade was still open. It was not.⁴¹

Ford ultimately lost the election by less than a percentage point. He blamed the loss on the religious vote, later saying, “He [Carter] handled the religion vote very shrewdly, and the South came through for him.”⁴² His assessment, how-

ever, lacked insight into how the presidential tone changed during his presidency, and the lasting results. Ford’s general disinclination to place the presidency in the middle of a national vision of God and country helped de-imperialize the executive branch and reinforced a separation of church and state in partisan functions, a separation that Nixon had regularly threatened. As was generally the case for Ford’s presidency, he did not receive any political benefit for exercising presidential restraint. But with Carter’s election, Ford had set the stage for continuing the practice, in the Executive office, of making policies informed by religious underpinnings and of diminishing the practice of civil religion. These practices, largely emulated by the new president, helped the nation move beyond Watergate and Vietnam. It was fitting, then, that Carter, in his first act as president, thanked Ford for “all he has done to heal our land.”⁴³

Endnotes

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3. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).
4. An Analysis of the Voting Behavior of the 5th Congressional District of Michigan, 1920-1948,” *Legislative Reference Service Report*, July 12, 1950, Box G23, Campaign File, 1948-74, Ford Congressional Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library (GRFL).
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6. David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Postwar Presidents: From Truman to Obama* (University of Georgia Press: 2012), 130.
7. *Washington Post*, 10 August 1974, D4.
8. *New York Times*, 8 August 1974, 24; Barrie Doyle and James C. Hefley, “Prayer and a Quiet Faith,” *Christianity Today*, 30 August 1974, 33. In his memoirs, Ford wrote, “I have always felt a closeness to

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9. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 August 1959, 7.
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 15. Richard M. Nixon, Introduction to *White House Sermons*, Ben Hibbs, ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), vi.
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 18. H.R. Haldeman to Alexander Butterfield, n.d., February 1971, in Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 98.
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 20. Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: 1969-1974* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970-1975), 1 February 1972, 126.
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 25. *New York Times*, 27 August 1974, 32.
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 27. *New York Times*, 11 August 1974, A1.
 28. Ford, *Public Papers*, 19 August 1974, 25-26.
 29. Ford, *Public Papers*, 19 August 1974, 22-28; Smith and Smith detailed the rhetorical significance of the manner in which Ford announced the amnesty program. "Coalitional Crisis of the Ford Presidency," 123-127.
 30. Ford, *Public Papers*, 8 September 1974, 101-104.
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 32. Though Ford refused to elaborate on his religious beliefs, his credentials were clear. His son was enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He also had a close relationship with Billy Zeoli, the prominent owner of Gospel Films in Grand Rapids, who sent him individual devotionals each week. See Billy Zeoli, "God's Got a Better Idea," in Gordon Vander Till Papers, Box 2; GRFL.
 33. William C. Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 461; Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 467-472. Ford and Graham did share the same stage at the Freedom Day Celebration in Charlotte, North Carolina, in May 1975. Graham's invitation did not come from the White House, however, and Ford did not claim a close friendship with Graham from the podium, nor did he address the audience principally in religious language. See Ford, *Public Papers*, 20 May 1975, 696-697.
 34. Flowers, "President Jimmy Carter," 117.
 35. William J. Baroody, Jr. to Robert Hartmann, 2 October 1974, BE 5-3, WHCF, GRFL.
 36. Reporting on the news conference, the *New York Times* reprinted the president's busing statements, references to different varieties of private schools, and seemed to link this with comments the president made later that "this is not...an Administration

- of special interests.... This is an Administration of public interest," 26 August 1975, 1, 17.
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 42. James Cannon, *Gerald R. Ford: An Honorable Life* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 444.
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