What role did religion play in the Washington and Lincoln presidencies?

by Michael Miller

George Washington kneeling in prayer in the snow at Valley Forge.

Abraham Lincoln bent over a Bible with his son Tad.

KEEPING THE FAITH - What role did religion play in the presidencies of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln? CNS Illustration by Scott Adrian Hinton. It's doubtful one happened, and the other one's a misrepresentation.

There's no evidence that the scene depicting Washington in prayer ever actually took place. In fact, according to one source, the commander of the Continental Army and future president of the United States always stood when praying.

The photo of Lincoln and his son actually show them looking at a picture book, though the photo was used to promote Bible reading.

The apparent inaccuracy of those depictions, though, doesn't settle various questions about the actual religious beliefs of the two men still considered by many to be the greatest presidents in U.S. history.

"The nature of their faith is highly debated," said Gary Smith, professor of history at Grove City College, a Christian school in Grove City, Pa. Smith is author of the new book "Faith and the Presidency: Religion, Politics, and Public Policy from George Washington to George W. Bush" ($35, 680 pages, Oxford University Press).

Further stirring the waters of history is the fact that although each of the leaders frequently referred to God and made biblical references, neither said publicly what their exact beliefs were - a behavior common to most U.S. presidents. Much of what we know of their faith has to be inferred - leaving it wide open to debate, of course.

BATTLE OVER THE GENERAL

The religion of Washington has been a hot topic of debate in recent years, Smith said, with several biographies saying "very different kinds of things."

"I think what you can say is he deeply believed in God's providential control of history," Smith said, citing the first president's military orders, personal letters and presidential addresses. "I think it's also right to say that prayer mattered to Washington, that he was a man who ordered his soldiers to participate in worship services and thanksgiving services for victories during the Revolutionary War."

Many historians over the past several decades have described Washington as a deist. Deism of the time was a philosophy that denied the supernatural and divine revelation, instead saying that the existence of God could be inferred from nature and that religious beliefs must be products of human reason.

But Smith said there is "ample evidence" that Washington asked people to pray for him, "which is one reason I think the traditional notion of deism doesn't float."

Washington's infrequent attendance at church and others' claims that he never took communion also cast doubt on whether he had Christian beliefs. Smith said that while Washington "worshipped more frequently at some times than others," he rarely if ever missed a Sunday during the eight years of his presidency.

"I personally take a middle position," Smith said. "I use a term that a friend developed, called theistic rationalism, which means that his religious views were a blend of theism, naturalist religion-deism and rationalism. He believed God played an active role in the universe. He seems to have a pretty high view of the Bible."

A REPUTATION DIVIDED

Conflicting claims regarding Lincoln's faith also abound.

"What position you come down with on Lincoln depends on some extent what resources are reliable," Smith said.

The professor said that Lincoln "faithfully" attended Washington, D.C.'s, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church when he was president and also "had a fairly steady record of church attendance in Illinois."

Those trying to promote a more nonreligious view of Lincoln, though, argue that he was a confirmed secularist if not an atheist, at least during his Illinois days.

What's definite about Lincoln, though, is his frequent usage of biblical allusions. His famous "house divided" reference, for instance, in an 1858 speech about slavery was pulled from Matthew 12.

"It would be a way that he frequently used images and metaphors and references that are taken from the

Bible that people would recognize," said Douglas Wilson, co-director of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill. Wilson is the author of the new book "Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words" ($27, 352 pages, Knopf), which studies the writings of the late president.

"Everybody else did it, too," Wilson said of politicians making Bible allusions. "He knew the Bible very, very well."

As to what Lincoln believed, though, "it depends on when you're talking about," Wilson said.

Lincoln was brought up as a Primitive Baptist, but "he did not join the church, and he was known especially when he was a young man as a religious skeptic," Wilson said. "He questioned Christian dogma and doctrines and so forth."

Lincoln's public Christian references began to increase after he became the 16th president of the United States, though, according to Wilson.

"He began to use the language which was common invoking God in his public, ceremonial speeches, and there's evidence that he changed his religious views to some extent, but it's very hard to say exactly," Wilson said. "He was very closemouthed about it."

Grove City College's Smith sees a stronger faith after Lincoln became president, thanks to both personal tragedy - his son, Willie, died after Lincoln became president - and the national tragedy of the Civil War.

"You can see him talking about it more," Smith said. "He's certainly one of the most theologizing of the presidents. He certainly left in his private letters and public addresses a testimony that faith was important to

him. But, like Washington, it's hard to say exactly what he believed about essential Christian doctrines like the deity of Christ or the nature of salvation."

No matter what he believed, though, Lincoln maintains a high rank in the American pantheon. "He's the great American martyr" who was shot on Good Friday - April 14, 1865 - though he didn't die until the next day.

"In the civil religion of America, he's our savior, he died for our country the way Christ died for our sins," Smith said.

Copley News Service Faithful leaders

Quotes attributed to Abraham Lincoln:

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day."

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"A house divided against itself cannot stand.

"I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved - I do not expect the house to fall - but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.

"In regard to this Great Book, I have to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book."

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Quotes attributed to George Washington:

"What students would learn in American schools above all is the religion of Jesus Christ."

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"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 favors."

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"The foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing is a vice so mean and low that every person of sense and character detests and despises it."

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