

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

John Adams: One of Few Presidents Open to Other Religions

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John Adams believed God was guiding America. One sentence sums it up: “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the Earth.”¹

Adams mused often about Providence: “There is a Power above who is capable and willing to put all things right in the end ... and I doubt not he will.”² He wrote to his wife Abigail: “May God in his providence overrule the whole for the good of mankind.”³ He was willing to see himself and his illnesses in that light, too. In the same letter he said, “Of ill health I have no right to complain, because it is given me by Heaven.”

Adams had considered the ministry as a young man except that New England churches were infected with fights and confessions of faith that he couldn't swallow. He was pleased that the 1620 Plymouth settlers from Scrooby Nottinghamshire rejected creeds and confessions in religion, as well as any episcopal hierarchies. His Congregational church in Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts was run on classic Congregational principles – church meeting has ultimate control, not the minister, or elders, or church associations. Around 1750 they changed to Unitarian and the church remains so to this day.

He believed that the promise of a future life where rewards and punishments would be dispensed depending on one's life on Earth was the strongest sanction for moral conduct. God governed his creation “by proportioning Rewards to Piety and Virtue, and

Punishments to Disobedience and Vice.”⁴ “What stronger motive to virtue and to the preservation of liberty can the human mind perceive, next to those of rewards and punishments in a future life?” The Pennsylvania and Vermont Constitutions of 1776 and 1777 required members of their Houses of Representatives to swear an oath affirming their belief in a future state for the sake of good order. Only the Universalists, founded around 1780 in Boston, consistently spoke against it and did not believe that the doctrine of everlasting punishment was either correct or should be used as a threat.

Writing to Benjamin Rush, Adams declared that neither savage nor civilized man without a revelation could ever have discovered or invented religious faith, and so he disagreed with those who would argue Western religion was man’s invention.⁵ He believed there was equality between the Abrahamic faiths. “It has pleased the Providence of the first Cause, the Universal Cause, that Abraham should give religion not only to Hebrews but to Christians and Mahomitans, the greatest part of the modern civilized world,” he wrote in 1818.⁶

Adams read and respected certain sacred Vedic Indian texts and noted that Rev. Joseph Priestly, the persecuted British Unitarian scientist and theologian who migrated to Pennsylvania and was a friend of Thomas Jefferson, used them, too, and was sympathetic to Hinduism. Writing to Jefferson, Adams said, “Where is to be found theology more orthodox, or philosophy more profound, than in the introduction to the [Hindu] Shasta. ‘God is one creator of all universal sphere, without beginning, without end. God governs all the creation by a general providence, resulting from his eternal designs. Search not the essence and the nature of the eternal, who is one; your research will be vain and presumptuous. It is enough that day by day, and night by night, you adore his power, his wisdom and his goodness, in his works.’”⁷ That certainly is a form of mysticism.

Regarding Jesus, he agreed with Jefferson and most of the Enlightenment theologians that Jesus was a great man and worthy of following, but not divine. He mentioned also that some of Jesus’ teachings were not reasonable – a view that would cause much irruption in many Christian circles today: “We must come to the principles of Jesus. But when will all men and all nations do as they would be done by? Forgive all injuries, and love their enemies as themselves? Alas, not very soon, if ever.”⁸

Adams mainly relied on the British religious and political experience for his ideas, not the French as Jefferson did. John Knox and others came back from Scotland with new ideas from Geneva in the 16th century, and it took another century for Britain to rid themselves of the “execrable race of the Stuarts” and begin the long struggle for democracy. It was hard going. The English dissenting Puritans, who worked and prayed for local church control for England and became learned and better read than most members of the Church of England, were “so vexed and tortured by the powers of

those days, for no other crime than their knowledge and their freedom of inquiry and examination” that they had to flee their homeland. But they still thought of America as the “mother country.”

Amazingly, he was able to use the most prevalent sin of the Old Testament – idolatry – in reference to George Washington: “I have been distressed to see some members of this house disposed to idolize an image which their own hands have molten. I speak here of the superstitious veneration that is sometimes paid to General Washington.”⁹ What does that remind you of today?

He read the prophets of Israel and knew the Bible extensively. Returning to America in 1788 after his stay in England, he became deeply apprehensive about America’s moral decline as the prophets of Israel were concerned about Israel’s decline in most instances. Like Israel, its virtue was jaded and faded. Personal gain rather than communal values became the norm. The egalitarian social order had given way to special interests of self-gratification, which produced the usual hierarchies of wealth and privilege. In spite of American sins, Adams had a high view of his Puritan and Enlightened land because God was guiding it: “America was designed by providence for the Theatre, on which Man was to make his true figure, on which science, Virtue, Liberty, Happiness, and Glory were to exist in Peace.”¹⁰ America had values that should be spread abroad as part of its ordained mission to the world. He continually referred to God’s Providence and delivering America from its enemies, e.g. “(I join) with my friends in thanksgiving and praise to the Supreme Being who hath so remarkably delivered our enemies into our hands.”¹¹

He looked forward to a sovereign America and said that war was often a necessity. But Adams did not discount his English heritage both from Great Britain and the Puritans regarding providence. In an allusion to Hebrews 11, which catalogs the great saints of early Christianity, Adams wrote about the English ancestors: “Recollect their amazing fortitude, their bitter sufferings – the hunger, the nakedness, the cold, which they patiently endured – the several labors of clearing their grounds, building their houses, raising their provisions, amidst dangers from wild beasts and savage men.”¹² Are we the children of Great Britain any more than the cities of London, Exeter, and Bath? But Adams saw a horrible resemblance to Lady Macbeth regarding the parent England and the child America:

Even while smiling in her face,
Have plucked her nipple from the boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out.

And yet there is such a dilemma in breaking away from the parents and kin that promote such misery in nations and in families of all eras – “Are we not brethren and

fellow subjects with those in Britain, only under a somewhat different method of legislation ... and taxation? But admitting we are children, have not children a right to complain when their parents are attempting to break their limbs, to administer poison, or to sell them to enemies for slaves?"¹³ Along with the examples of Greece and Rome in the past, at his juncture in history Britain defended for America the "inherent rights against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers, against arbitrary kings and cruel priests, in short, against the gates of earth and hell."

Adams was one of the few presidents open to other religions. Without going into multitudinous cases, I will hazard an observation. Fundamentalists in religion in all eras of history hold that their version of faith and truth is valid for all people without exception. There can be no other way. It is binary thinking at its best or worst; "we are right and they are wrong." There are no gray areas in between. They become missionaries who believe that their way of life and faith is authoritative for everyone everywhere. Dealing with a person, group, or nation of another faith is necessary at times for prudential or economic reasons, but it would be done with some disdain, and perhaps not done in "good faith." As some medieval Catholics said, "Error has no rights."

Those who recognize they may only have a handle on partial truth can make a huge difference. This allows respect for other positions. Real diplomacy can only happen when parties take each other seriously. The spread of freedom as a fundamental point of America's mission depends on it.

In summary, Adams believed the founding of America was providential. God was not sitting in the background of heaven, having wound up the universe, and letting humankind get on with it. God was also intervening in human affairs and politics. God is making room for freedom and mystical illumination.

Secondly, deliverance and mystical illumination are biblically linked, and one cannot happen without the other. In order for the canon and feudal laws to be overcome, there had to be a revolution so that the poor could not only be delivered from servitude, but education had to follow so that they could someday govern themselves and not be dependent on the first families and the very few universities that supplied the ruling class. Consequential to this was the belief in equality that he and Jefferson pursued, perhaps viewed differently, but pressed with equal vigor. The laws must back this up. Adams suggested that "we are all the children of one Father, all accountable to him for our conduct to one another, all equally bound to respect each other's self-love."

Thirdly, Adams states that the purpose of America is not simply to sustain itself in freedom and wealth, but it is also to be for the world, spreading emancipation to all so that the slaves of the world in whatever form they found themselves could be

freed. God wanted America not only to be good and righteous and prosperous but also to be a servant to the world. This rings true for all the Founders, and this form of American Exceptionalism takes center stage with most of them. Adams can be criticized for not relating this to slaves, as can so many others.

Fourthly, Adams was willing to put the country before self. He could live with wars if they benefited the United States. It was a brand of asceticism that he lived with some gusto. But along with this he concluded that America needed to be wary of those who did not put nation in front of self, and he was always on his guard against those who took advantage of their positions. For this the government must set up controls to spurn the selfish interests of humankind and here he fundamentally disagreed with Jefferson but agreed with James Madison realizing that factions could tear America apart unless checks and balances were in operation. It might even make him into a heretic today, with most Americans lusting for unregulated freedom to do whatever they like, whenever they like, and to hell with the rest.

Fifthly, Adams claimed his religion was the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, which today is used not only by Christians but many Jews and Muslims as well. He appreciated the Vedic scriptures. This Founder opened the way for a better inter-faith ecumenism. This helps diplomacy both within and outside the nation. Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Abraham Lincoln followed on. So, too, in their own but less obvious ways did the Roosevelts, Dwight Eisenhower, and others. Let us hope that current and future administrations realize this connection between interfaith theology, the American mission, and its wars.

Lastly, even more crucial for our own day, is Adams' recognition of the need for America to have a purpose that is linked with the divine plan for the world. America was to be the foremost defender of the rights of people everywhere, not just its own. This will involve sensitivity toward other nations and using favorable trade deals, alliances, and treaties to help sort things out. It is a calling fraught with dangers but needed. Sometimes, but never always, it will involve holy wars.

Today, America is being challenged in its role of world leader and dispenser of freedoms. Vladimir Putin wants to see Holy Russia renewed in its efforts to save the world and enlists the church and other Russian institutions to help in this goal, the main ideas coming both from the old Soviet Union and Marx and Lenin ideals, and also from 1000 years of convincing itself of its Godly mission to Europe and the world.

Another unlikely wannabe world leader is Turkey's President Recep Tayip Erdogan who, according to *The Economist*, sees himself as leader of the global dispossessed. "He is trying to reinvent himself as the voice of the *umma* (I.e. Muslims everywhere), and of the world's poor. He is appealing to black Americans as well. One of his daughters has

bought Muhammad Ali's house in Chicago and is setting up a summer school for Muslims. There is a "Malcolm X Avenue" in Ankara. He has a lot of support from Muslims all over the world. "Turkey's leader and his acolytes seem to be convinced that the old-world order is crumbling, and are looking for a role in the new one ... It is here to stay." ¹⁴

What should be the American response to this? Certainly, we want to encourage any country and leader to express real and solid help for the poor that is not simply self-aggrandizing. But we also must be very careful that these "ideals" are not a cover for world domination, as indeed we must do the same for ourselves.

America can still lead the world. We have the money and a history of help for the poor. But the current administration doesn't believe in this program. "America First" excludes much of the Marshall Plan ideals of our past. But we can get it back with voting. Do we have the will? Are we ready to see John Adams and many of our other outward looking presidents and politicians as people to follow?

Citations:

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7. Adams to Jefferson Dec 25, 1813
8. Adams to Jefferson Feb 2, 1816
9. Notes of Benjamin Rush Nook Books p 12 (cf Psalm 106; Isaiah 45 inter alia)
10. Quoted by Gordon S Wood *Revolutionary Characters – What Made the Founders Different* 2006 p 179
11. Adams to Abigail Adams, October 25, 1777
12. Adams, *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, Diggins ed p 225
13. *ibid* p 223
14. "Turkey's Strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Takes to the World Stage." *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, www.economist.com/europe/2020/09/08/turkeys-strongman-recep-tayyip-erdogan-takes-to-the-world-stage.

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