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PROBING EDUCATION

John Adams at Harvard and Beyond

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features John Adams, his education, and years at Harvard.

13th in a Series

John Adams at Harvard: Adams seriously engaged the college's relatively liberal curriculum in theology, mathematics, and natural science; he made friends with students from different social classes, often those above his own; and he joined a speaking club where his performances so impressed his classmates that they suggested he would make a better lawyer than the minister his pious father desired. He would become the only graduate in his class to hold a Hollis scholarship and not become a minister.

Harvard acknowledgments of Adams' intellectual engagement came quickly. A speaking part at graduation in 1755 earned him his first job, as a teacher; he used his salary to pay for his legal studies. His use of the college library after graduation sustained him until he could build up his own impressive collection in legal and political history. And in his master's thesis address in 1758, a rite of passage for most ambitious Harvard graduates, he defended a theme that would increase in significance for the rest of his life: that civil government was necessary for man.

By the mid-18th century, Harvard had become, above all else, a recruiter of intellectual talent and a unifying cultural force in Massachusetts and neighboring New England colonies. In this respect Adams, born into a family thoroughly committed to its own small community, did just what the College hoped. As the idealistic celebrant of New England's religious and civil history in *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law* (1765); as the lead attorney courageously defending the British soldiers indicted in the Boston Massacre (1770); as the congressman who led the final floor fight for Independence (1776); as the principal negotiator of America's peace treaty with Britain (1783); as the author of *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* (1787-88), the longest and most learned political work by an 18th century American; and, as president, when defending America's maritime independence in the Quasi-War with France (1797-1800), he adopted broader views and higher aspirations in religion, in law, and in politics.^[1]

Adams' Views: One sentence best sums up the second president on America: "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."^[2] This is a superb summary of Adams' overview and the practical effect that he hoped would influence the mission and the wars of America. Where did this come from?

Doubtless Harvard influenced him in many ways with most of its early graduates becoming clergy who were also expected to be civic leaders being part of the Puritan establishment of New England. Religion was one of his major interests, but he could be very critical of its manifestations.

He wrote to his wife: "My Religion you know is not exactly conformable to that of the greatest Part of the Christian World. It excludes superstition. But with all the superstition that attends it, I think the Christian the best that is or has been. I would join with those who wish ecclesiastical Tyranny abolished, and the frauds of the Priesthood detested: But in this Country we have little of this. If my feeble Testimony has done any good, rejoice and have my reward."^[3]

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.^[4] 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.^[5] This was rare at the time. Most American and European Christians did not admit to any equality of religions. It was also un-Harvard at this time.

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 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.’”^[6] Adams was one of the few presidents open to other religions.

Though he admired the Greek philosophers and playwrights, he did say that Moses did more than all the Greek legislators and philosophers.^[7] This helps us see which religion and philosophy he used to help his political ideas.

He wrote his master’s thesis at Harvard on the need for government. He expanded that later with his three-volume *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States (1787-1788)*, *Discourses on Davila (1790)* and much personal correspondence were indicative of this. He detested the large distinctions between the haves and the have-nots that were occurring. Regarding the shape of government, he wrote there was always some form of natural leadership that would emerge in any society. There would be superiors and inferiors. There were some good families that should rule “because God had laid in the constitution and course of nature the foundations of the distinction.”^[8] There was to be moral and political equality, but ability was another matter. “It is only in point of rights that men are born or created either equal or independent.”^[9]

Regarding secular government, he took a page out of Montesquieu and agreed that not one form of government was suited to all forms of society. Governments were suited to the characteristics among the people it was to regulate. The spirit of tyrannies was fear; of monarchies, honor; and of republican governments, virtue. At this early time, he believed virtue was possible in America. Virtue must be implanted by family, education, business, religion, and service to the nation. There had to be a positive passion for the public good, superior to all private passions. There must be a concern for the welfare of society that was beyond private selfish interests. Virtue had many meanings in the 18th century, and for Adams it signified the qualities of industry, frugality, and prudence which were the virtues of his ancestors’ Puritan ethic, cleansed of many theological trappings. He expected the universities to teach this.

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 that produced the usual hierarchies of wealth and privilege.

The main human passion that government had to deal with was more than economics. None was "more essential or remarkable, than the *passion for distinction* to be observed, esteemed, praised, beloved and admired by his fellows." The need to be noticed could be emulation, ambition, jealousy, envy, and/or vanity. "It is a principal end of government to regulate this passion."^[10]

Part of the reason for this disillusion with American society was because untalented and uneducated people began to dominate the nation. Certain families were making enormous effort to trace back their ancestral lines; some very wealthy people were not at all suitable for leadership; land speculators were gaining ground and political influence; many believed it right to further increase the divide between the rich and the poor. He wanted thrifty, industrious, and honest people as well in the true Calvinist mold but who also knew how to distribute their wealth when needed. He asked Jefferson later: "Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice and folly?"^[11] Americans were becoming like everyone else, and by 1789 he decided that they had no advantages except geographical location. He was mightily discouraged.

His younger vision of the American virtuousness was entirely over. His latent Calvinist Puritanism with its deep suspicion of human nature and fear of any national exceptionalism finally won the day. This affected his view of local vs. national government, and he gradually changed to a more federalist system. By 1790, Adams' conception of American society had dramatically changed. No longer did he envision a society of unspoiled republicans, maintaining their own independence, and guiding their conduct by the strict standards of social virtue. He became a centralist, or federalist. The Virginians (except for Washington) were wrong about virtuous farmers and yeomen.

Adams had much to say on variations in church ethics in relation to politics and wars. He said that there were big differences between Roman and Christian virtues on revenge. For the whole of Roman history revenge was considered a generous and heroic passion. Nothing was too good for a friend, and nothing was too bad for an enemy. But "Our Saviour taught the immorality of revenge, and the moral duty of forgiving injuries, and even the duty of loving enemies."^[12] Yet in the same letter the finest examples he could find were not Christians, but Marius and Sylla, Caesar, Pompey, Antony, and Augustus from Rome itself. This is a major point. It shows how Adams and many of the Deists then and now

often use the ethics of Jesus but sometimes find better examples of virtue in the world outside the Bible or Church. I suspect that had Adams known more of other religions, he would have found good examples of ethics in some of their main characters as well. But even as he confessed that he felt so much injured by the “barbarian Britons that I have a strong inclination to meet them in the field. This is not revenge, I believe, but there is something sweet and delicious in the contemplation of it ... [yet] they are virtuous and pious passions that prompt us to desire [General Howe’s] destruction, and to lament and deplore his success and prosperity. The desire of assisting towards his disgrace is an honest wish.”^[13]

Thomas Ellis writes detailing some other important differences between the Adams and Jefferson: “the catechism of liberal America [and Jefferson] was dominated by references to ‘freedom,’ ‘equality,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘individualism.’ The Adams catechism was dominated by references to ‘control,’ ‘balance,’ ‘aristocracy,’ and ‘public responsibility’ ... and for a nation ready to explode onto the world economically, full of energy and natural resources, as well as a youthful sense of immortality and destiny, just about the last thing needed was a voice counseling caution, social responsibility, and reconciliation to eventual decline.”^[14]

After his defeat for a second term by Jefferson, Adams said, “If I were to go over my life again, I would be a shoemaker rather than an American statesman.”^[15] Adams considered that his main accomplishment as president was that he kept America out of war with France. Ironically that was an important item and perhaps cost him the presidency because there were so many warmongers around at the time.

Providence, wars, and the mission of America: 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.”^[16] That was preached by Harvard and others. 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.”^[17]

Though Adams said America had a “Depravity of Heart that I could scarcely have believed, of so many to their disgrace”^[18] he also saw that America was the place of the future and an exemplar for the world because God, not man, was behind it. He wrote to his wife from Amsterdam in 1781: “the great designs of Providence must be accomplished. Great indeed! The progress of society will be accelerated by centuries by this Revolution. The Emperor of Germany is adopting, as fast as he can, American ideas of toleration and religious liberty,

and it will become the fashionable system of all Europe very soon. Light spread from the dayspring in the west, and may it shine more and more until the perfect day!”^[19]

Freedom from Britain, democracy at home, and prosperity for the people were crucial parts of the early American dream for Adams. He was an important person in helping to ferment the Revolution having been given the authority as chairman along with Edward Rutledge and Richard Henry Lee to draw up a resolution to dissociate the colonies from Britain. It might well have been as James Warren claimed, “the most important Resolution that ever was taken in America.”^[20]

Indeed, it was the original “Declaration of Independence.” In July 1776, the final task of giving the world the manifold reasons that had made this step necessary was taken and given its final version by Jefferson after Congress had altered much of what TJ wanted. Adams’ *Thoughts on Government* was considered important by his contemporaries; he started the draft of a new constitution for Massachusetts in 1779; he rejected out of hand the idea of an American monarchy that was being proposed and was against power by heredity; he supported the right to vote for every white male, 21 years of age, resident in a place for one year preceding an election, and needed to have a freehold estate that made an annual income of three pounds or other estate to the value of sixty pounds.^[21] This, however, was a wider privilege that most of the Fathers were willing to offer. He sought voting equality. He was anxious to withhold the vote only from the ragtag sections of society who he thought couldn’t be trusted and he believed that corruption would come from those without property. “The Dons, the Bashaws, the Grandees, the Patricians, the Sachems, the Nabobs ... sigh and groan, yet a more equal Liberty than has prevailed in other Parts of the Earth must be established in America.”^[22]

It is important to establish how Adams thought about the perils of human nature in relation to war and democracy, and that he looked at attempts to form new governments with a realistic and some might say jaundiced eye. He loved the poets Pope and Horace:

Men would be angels, angels would be gods,
Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell,
Aspiring to be angels, men rebel.^[23]

He argued that the modern improvers of society have assumed too much. They undertook to build a new universe and trampled on “all the philosophy and policy of all ages of men ... [but] the most yahooish brutality is patiently endured, countenanced, propagated, and applauded. But touch a solemn truth in collision with a dogma of a sect, though capable of the clearest proof, and you would find you have disturbed a nest, and the hornets will swarm about your legs and hands and fly into your face and eyes. When we are weary of looking at

religion, we will, if you please, turn our eyes to government. Is there toleration in politics? Where shall we find it?"^[24]

He began his presidential inaugural address claiming that there was no middle course between submission to a foreign power and total independence. America broke to pieces the chains and the rod of iron that held them under. This was parallel to the English Puritans rallying against the King and much of the same language was used.

They had a lot to do: "Canada and Nova Scotia must soon be ours; there must be war for it; they know how it will end, but the sooner the better."^[25] There's a bit of imperialism for you.

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 catalogues 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. ..."^[26] "Are we the children of Great Britain any more than the cities of London, Exeter, and Bath?" But Adams saw a horrible Shakespearian 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.

He warned: "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide. It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious, or less avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. It is not true, in fact, and nowhere appears in history. Those passions are the same in all men, under all forms of simple government, and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence, and cruelty. ... Democracy is chargeable with all the blood that has been spilled for five-and-twenty years. Napoleon and all his generals were but creatures of democracy, as really as Rienze, Theodore, Massaniello, Jack Cade, or Wat Tyler."

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.

Conclusion: Adams believed education was crucial so that people could 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 stated 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 echoes the John Winthrop’s and George Washington’s sense of mission are prominent. He can be criticized for not relating this to slaves, as can so many others.

Adams was willing to put the country before self and believed all those Harvard chapel talks and Braintree Unitarian sermons that stressed this. He could live with wars if they benefited the United States. It was a brand of asceticism that he fostered 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 Thomas Jefferson but agreed with James Madison realizing that factions could tear America apart unless checks and balances were in operation. This was good Calvinist stuff from his Puritan forebearers and early Harvard. One can still find this philosophy in the select New England prep schools. 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.

Currently we are exposed to a new folly, partly derived from a misunderstanding of the Puritans. “White Christian nationalists tend to favor a strong military and capital punishment and oppose gun control. WCN is thus strongly correlated with opposition to interracial marriage, non-white immigration, and affirmative action. To understand how American Christianity became so entangled with racism and violence, we first have to trace it back to its scriptural roots. Those roots are dual. It turns out that WCN is not just one story, but two. The first is a promised land story. The New England Puritans saw themselves as the heirs of the biblical Israelites. They imagined themselves as a “chosen people” and they came to see the new world; as their promised land. And as their relationship with the natives shifted from curiosity to hostility, they began to see the Indians as Canaanites who had to be conquered.”[27] Adams is the better interpreter of biblical and American history.

Adams appreciated the Vedic scriptures. I’m not sure where this came from, probably not Harvard at the time. Harvard’s William James with his *Varieties of Religious Experience* was much later. Adams opened the way for a better interfaith ecumenism and essentially made room for William James. This helps

diplomacy both within and outside the nation. Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and 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, and crucial for our own day, was Adams' recognition of the need for America to have a purpose that is linked with an overall plan for the world. For Adams, America was to be the foremost defender of the rights of peoples everywhere, not just her own. For now, 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. A broad education is key to this goal.

[1] RICHARD ALAN RYERSON, *John Adams at Harvard - What he learned, and what he made of it*, NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2016, Harvard Today. See his book, *John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Johns Hopkins), as background on the future president's intellectual development.

[2] Adams, *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, Diggins p 214

[3] Letter to Abigail Jan 28, 1799

[4] Adams to Rush Jan 21, 1810

[5] Quoted from Jon Meacham, *American Gospel*, 2006, p 178

[6] Adams to Jefferson Dec 25, 1813

[7] Meacham op cit p 40

[8] Adams, *Defense IV* 427

[9] Adams' marginal comments in his copy of de Malby's *de la Legislation* p 68-9; Adams Collection, Boston Public Library

[10] Ellis op cit p 166 taken for *Works VI*, 232-34

[11] Adams to Jefferson, Dec 21, 1819

[12] Adams to Abigail June 2, 1777

[13] Adams to Abigail August 19, 1777

[14] Ellis op cit p 228

[15] Paul C Nagel, *John Quincy Adams – A Public Life, a Private Life*, 1998, p 127

[16] Quoted by Gordon S Wood *Revolutionary Characters – What Made the Founders Different* 2006 p 179

[17] Adams to Abigail Adams, October 25, 1777

[18] Adams to Elbridge Gerry, Dec 13, 1785, Adams Microfilm Reel 362

[19] Charles Francis Adams ed, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams, during the Revolution*, Boston 1975, p 402

[20] Adams to James Warren, May 1776; *Warren-Adams Letters*, LXXII, 245

[21] John R Howe, Jr, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, Princeton UP, 1966, p 85

[22] Adams to Patrick Henry, June 3, 1776; *Adams Microfilm*, Reel 89

[23] Alexander Pope, [here](#).

[24] Adams to Taylor Part XXXI 1814

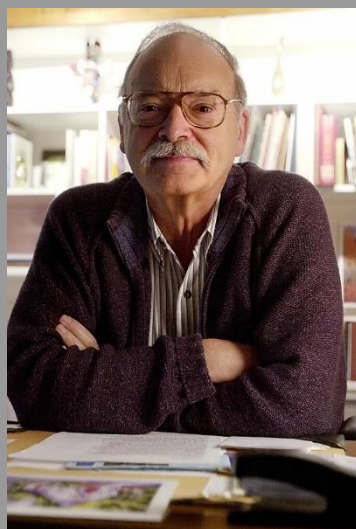
[25] Ted Widmer, *Ark of the Liberties*, 2008, p 58

[26] Adams, *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, Diggins ed p 225

[27] Philip Gorski, *White Christian Nationalism: The Deep Story Behind the Capitol Insurrection*, Berkley Forum, Georgetown University, January 22, 2021

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