

“Faith of Our Fathers” – Lay Worship Service – June 17, 2012

By Todd Iveson

Opening

JOHN ADAMS: Permit me to introduce you to Mr. Horace Holly, who is on his way to Kentucky where he has been invited to undertake the Superintendance of a University. . . . He is indeed an important Character; and if Superstition, Bigotry, Fanaticism and Intolerance will allow him to live in Kentucky, he will contribute Somewhat to the illumination of the darkest and most dismal Swamps in the Wilderness. I shall regret his removal from Boston because that City ought always to have one Clergy man at least who will compel them to think and enquire. [Jan. 28, 1818]

Reading

The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism, Karen Armstrong, pp. 81-82

“The leaders of the Revolution . . . experienced the revolution as a secular event. They were rationalists, men of the Enlightenment, inspired by the modern ideals of John Locke, Scottish Common Sense philosophy, or Radical Whig ideology. They were deists, and differed from more orthodox Christians in their view of revelation and the divinity of Christ. They conducted a sober, pragmatic struggle against an imperial power, moving only slowly and reluctantly toward revolution. They certainly did not see themselves as fighting a cosmic war against the legions of Antichrist. . . . The Declaration of Independence, drafted by Jefferson, with Adams and Franklin, and ratified by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, was an Enlightenment document.

But the Founding Fathers of the American republic were an aristocratic elite and their ideas were not typical. The vast majority of Americans were Calvinists, and they could not relate to this rationalist ethos. Indeed, many of them regarded deism as satanic ideology.”

Reflection

This is not your typical Father’s Day service. So, let me tell you how this service came to be.

My wife, Cande, today’s worship associate, organized the services for this summer. Late last month, she advised me at the dinner table that she had all the services arranged. These arrangements included me doing the service on Father’s Day. “Not to worry,” she said, “Andrew Twaddle has given me the materials from a service he did for their church in Maine. It’s right up your alley. It’s on the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams concerning their views on religion.”

Obviously, I agreed. Over the years, I have read a lot about our revolutionary period, and in particular Jefferson and Adams, so clearly I am interested in the topic. More importantly, after more than 30 years of marriage, I think I have learned a little bit about how to foster marital harmony. So here we are.

I would like to thank Andrew for his scholarship regarding the correspondence and apologies for the substantial liberties I am taking with his text. Andrew's thesis was that the claims of modern fundamentalists that this country was founded as a Christian nation are not supported by the views of Adams and Jefferson as expressed in their correspondence. He was right, and I endorse his thesis. But I also want to explore a little of the historical context of this debate and its meaning for the conflicts that exist today.

We begin with the long and fascinating relationship between Adams and Jefferson. It began in the early 1770's when they were both elected to the Continental Congress, convened by the colonies to address the wrongs they perceived to be visited upon them by the British government. When it became apparent that less confrontational means would not succeed in obtaining the concessions they felt were needed from the Crown, they were both early and ardent supporters of independence. As noted by Karen Armstrong, Adams was one of the principal collaborators with Jefferson on the Declaration of Independence.

They both continued to serve the new nation during the war and after, as ambassadors and active participants in the political life of the new country. But after the Articles of Confederation were dissolved and the new Constitution ratified, they soon became bitter political rivals. Although Jefferson governed very differently when he was President, in principle he was a small government, state's rights, small "d" democrat, a great supporter of the French revolution and apologist for the reign of terror. Adams, by contrast, believed that a strong federal government was essential to the continued survival of the new nation, and believed the French revolution demonstrated the dangers of direct democracy. Jefferson had passionate and devoted supporters. Adams was widely respected, but was never very popular.

After both had retired from public life, the Virginian plantation owner and Yankee farmer began a fourteen year correspondence in which they shared their thoughts on some of the most significant political and philosophical issues of the day. The last letter in that long correspondence was written by Jefferson to Adams in April 1826. The two men died on July 4, 1826, only hours apart. Adams' last words were reported to be, "Thomas Jefferson survives." He did not know that Jefferson had died at Monticello a few hours earlier.

One of the subjects on which these two gentlemen corresponded was the topic of religion. As Armstrong notes, the fundamentalists of the day did not share their Enlightenment views.

In *Battle for God*, Armstrong attributes modern fundamentalism in all its sectarian guises to the conflict between *logos*, or the rational, pragmatic and scientific thought that enables us to function in our physical world, and *mythos*, the search for meaning. In the premodern world, according to Armstrong, "Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence."

But with the great successes of science and rational thought of the 17th and 18th centuries, many in the west began to view *logos* as the only means to the truth, relegating *mythos* to the realm of superstition and giving rise to what we know as the Enlightenment era. Our nation was conceived and birthed on Enlightenment principles.

As noted in the reading, however, many of the people of the west – including in our new nation – "could not relate to this new rationalist ethos." In attempting to defend *mythos* against the *logos*

onslaught, many asserted the fundamentalist literalism of sacred works is the only source for truth. Instead of complementing one another, *mythos* and *logos* were now competing for the mantle of the one true way. As we can see from the correspondence of Adams and Jefferson, this conflict existed at the time of the Revolution, and we know it continues today.

What follows is in Jefferson's and Adams own words.

On Christianity:

JOHN ADAMS, Nov. 4, 1816: We have now, it seems, a National Bible Society "to propagate King James's Bible through all nations." Would it not be better, to apply these pious subscriptions to purify Christendom from the Corruptions of Christianity; than to propagate those corruptions in Europe, Asia, Africa and America?

I see ... something to recommend Christianity in its Purity, and Something to discredit its Corruption. ... The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my Religion.

JOHN ADAMS, Dec. 12, 1816: [M]y moral or religious Creed, . . . has for 50 or 60 years been contained in four short Words "Be Just and Good."

THOMAS JEFFERSON, Jan. 11, 1817: My answer was "say nothing of my religion. It is known to my god and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life. If that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one."

JOHN ADAMS, Jan. 23, 1825: There exists I believe throughout the whole Christian world a law which makes it blasphemy to deny or doubt the divine inspiration of all the books of the old and new Testaments from Genesis to Revelations. . . . I think such laws a great embarrassment, great obstructions to the improvement of the human mind. Books that cannot bear examination certainly ought not to be established as divine inspiration by penal laws.

On the Church:

THOMAS JEFFERSON, July 5, 1814: The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ leveled to every understanding and too plain to need explanation, saw, in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might, from its indistinctness, admit to everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power and pre-eminence. The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them: and for this obvious reason that nonsense can never be explained.

JOHN ADAMS, Feb1, 1816: [P]ower always sincerely, conscientiously ... believes itself right. Power always thinks it has a great soul, and vast views, beyond the comprehension of the Weak; and that it is doing God Service when it is violating all his laws. ... Power must never be trusted without a check.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, May 5, 1817: If, by religion, we are to understand Sectarian dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on that hypothesis is just, 'that this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it.' But the moral precepts, innate in man, and made a part of his physical constitution, as necessary for a social being, if the sublime doctrines of philanthropism, and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth in which all

agree, constitute true religion, then, without it, this world would be, as you again say, 'something not fit to be named, even indeed a Hell.'

On the Divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and Unitarianism:

THOMAS JEFFERSON, Aug. 22, 1813: I very much suspect that if thinking men would have the courage to think for themselves, and to speak what they think, it would be found that they do not differ in religious opinions, as much as is supposed. I remember to have heard Dr. Priestly say that if all England would candidly examine themselves and confess, they would find that Unitarianism was really the religion of all: and I observe a bill is now depending in parliament for the relief of Anti-Trinitarians. It is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one and one is three; and yet the one is not three, and the three are not one We should all then, like the quakers, live without an order of priests, moralize for ourselves, follow the oracle of conscience, and say nothing about what no man can understand, nor therefore believe; for I suppose belief to be the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.

JOHN ADAMS, Sept. 14, 1813: Now, my friend, can Prophecies, or miracles convince You, or Me, that infinite Benevolence, Wisdom and Power, created and preserves, for a time, innumerable millions to make them miserable, forever; for his own glory? Wretch! What is Glory? Is he ambitious? Does he want promotion? Is he vain? Tickled with Adulation? Exulting and triumphing in his Power and the Sweetness of his Vengeance? Pardon me, my Maker, for these awful questions. My Answer to them is always ready: I believe no such Things. My Adoration of the Author of the Universe is too profound and too sincere. The Love of God and his Creation; delight, Joy, Tryumph, Exultation in my own existence, 'tho but an Atom, a Molecule Organique, in the Universe; are my religion

THOMAS JEFFERSON: I can never join Calvin in addressing his god. . . . If ever man worshipped a false god, he did. The being described [by Calvin] is not the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent governor of the world; but a daemon of malignant spirit. It would be more pardonable to believe in no god at all than to blaspheme him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin

[Jesus'] doctrine of the Cosmogony of the world is very clearly laid down in the 3 first verses of the 1st chapter of John. . . .

Which truly translated means "in the beginning God existed, and reason (or mind) was with God. All things were created by it, and without it was made not one thing that was made." Yet this text, so plainly declaring the doctrine of Jesus that the world was created by the supreme, intelligent being, has been perverted by modern Christians to build up a second person of their tritheism by a mistranslation of [one] word. One of it's legitimate meanings indeed is 'a word.' But in that sense it makes an unmeaning John Adamsrgon: while the other meaning 'reason', equally legitimate, explains rationally the eternal preexistence of God, and his creation of the world. Knowing how incomprehensible it was that 'a word,' the mere action of articulation of the voice and organs of speech could create a world, they undertake to make of this articulation a second preexisting being, and ascribe to him, and not to God, the creation of the universe....

[Apr11, 1823]

Conclusion

What, then, can we say about the faith of our fathers as expressed by Adams and Jefferson? Although men of the enlightenment, they were not irreligious but accepted the existence of a deist god. This god was evident in the world around us and in the well-lived life. Attempts to further explain or define the divine are arrogant and pointless.

They were favorably disposed to the teachings of Jesus, but did not accept Biblical accounts of his life as factual. They believed them to be subject to human inquiry, debate, and discussion. They rejected faith in what could not be known by observation and reason, while accepting that there are some things that reason cannot comprehend.

They did not believe in the imposition of any faith system on this country, but instead were advocates of religious freedom. They saw dogmatism as a public danger.

They viewed churches as dangerous. They distrusted any clerical power.

They thought reasonable people would agree on basic items of faith if not distorted through church dogma. In particular, they rejected completely the doctrine of the Trinity and were sympathetic to the Unitarians. They regarded Trinitarianism as a Platonic addition to the teachings of Jesus.

As we are abundantly aware, the conflict between *mythos* and *logos* continues today. In the age of the Internet and cable TV, it is perhaps more evident than ever before.

So, when today's Fundamentalists say that the United States is a Christian country founded by men of Faith, we can reply that the Founding Fathers were, as we are today, people of faith – but not the fundamentalist faith you preach.

When they say the teachings of their church should be the foundation of national law, we can say our founding fathers feared, as we do, their church as a threat to a free society.

And when they say we should return to the faith of our fathers, we can say, "Amen."

CLOSING

THOMAS JEFFERSON: I think with you that it is a good world on the whole, that it has been framed on a principle of benevolence, and more pleasure than pain dealt out to us. There are indeed (who might say Nay) gloomy and hypochondriac minds, inhabitants of diseased bodies, disguised with the present, and despairing of the future; always counting that the worst will happen. To these I say How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened? My temperament is sanguine. I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern. [Apr. 8, 1816]

JOHN ADAMS: I admire your Navigation and should like to sail with you, either in your bark or in my own, along side of yours; Hope with her gay Ensigns displayed at the Prow; fear with her hobgoblins behind the stern. Hope springs eternal; and Hope is all that endures. Take away

hope and What remains? What pleasure? I mean. Take away Fear, and what Pain remains?
99/100ths of the Pleasures and Pains of Life are nothing but Hopes and Fears. [May 3, 1816]