

Faiths of Our Fathers (and Mothers)
Part I – Thomas Jefferson and John Adams
Robert Weekley

Today we take a careful and honest look at the hearts of our founding fathers and mothers.

(But, why do I insert “mothers” in the time-worn phrase – founding fathers? An exercise in “political correctness?” No. History has typically failed to recognize the intellectual and inspirational role of women to the same extent as the role of men. But these male leaders had close companionship and inspiration with the other half of their society – and we can be sure that ideas and opinions held by a man were known, shared, and contributed to by the often unsung women around him. A powerful example that is well recorded in writing is the influence of Abigail Adams on her husband John. So, as we talk about the founding fathers today, keep in mind that we are talking indirectly about the founding mothers as well.)

Why do we care today, in 2004, what these long-dead men – and women – believed?

I have observed that our national founding fathers and mothers are getting no peace, no opportunity to rest. They are being used constantly by anyone who tries to persuade others to join their cause. Just this week I heard the new president of the Republic of Georgia state that his administration was using the U.S.’ founding fathers as the basis for reforming the Georgian regime. I presume, like in so many other cases, he will get those old founding fathers to say just what he needs them to say.

But in no sense are the founding fathers more used – and misused – than in matters of religion – especially by Christian political-religious activists who are trying to justify changes to U.S. laws and even to our Constitution. Whether in matters of school prayer, the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, marriage, contraception, abortion rights, even control of guns, or waging preemptive war, these “true believers” do not hesitate to inform us of what they *know* the founding fathers would have wanted. A current example is the U.S. President’s exertion to memorialize a religious principle – the sanctity of heterosexual marriage – into the U.S. Constitution. If he is successful this would be the first time a Christian religious principle has marred the secular governmental charter so carefully crafted by our founding fathers.

A second reason for seeking an accurate understanding of what the founding fathers believed is that, as a body, their knowledge, wisdom, and spirit enabled them to create the best system of government that had ever been invented up to that time in history and it is still a powerful model for the world – despite our having slipped away from some of their ideals. A learned and famed English observer, Alfred North Whitehead, wrote many decades later:

I know of only two occasions in history when the people in power did what needed to be done about as well as you can imagine its being possible. One was the framing of your American Constitution. They were able statesmen; they had access to a body of good ideas; they incorporated these general principles into the instrument without

trying to particularize too explicitly how they should be put into effect; and they were men of immense practical experience themselves. The other example was in Rome and it undoubtedly saved civilization for, roughly, four hundred years. It was the work of Augustus and the set around him.

Today I want to briefly survey the religious beliefs of two of the most influential of the founding fathers: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both framers of the Constitution, men who devoted their lives to the new nation they had formed, and served as our second and third presidents, respectively. In a subsequent talk we will compare some of the other founders.

Jefferson and Adams – and I recognize that most of us are quite familiar with the details of their lives – were very different people in style, and in philosophy. Yet as their lives played out they converged in important philosophical and religious ways. As they sensed this philosophical convergence occurring, Adams wrote to Jefferson in 1813, “You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.” About this time they began, in their prolific correspondence, to discuss religion in depth, with Adams encouraging Jefferson to press on with his work which we have come to know as *The Jefferson Bible*. By the time these old widowers approached their almost simultaneous deaths on July 4, 1826 they had become truly soul mates and their last words testified to that beautiful convergence.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was raised in a family which had a high respect for education. Although his father, a member of the House of Burgesses had not gone to college, he was well read. His son Thomas was educated in church schools by Anglican clergymen.

Thomas’ father died when Thomas was fourteen and he then went to live with a guardian. At sixteen he told his guardian it would save money if he could be sent off to college because his presence at home drew a constant swarm of visitors which tended to stay for dinner. He convinced his guardian and he was off to Williamsburg.

At the College of William and Mary Jefferson was strongly impressed by some of his professors, in particular William Small who introduced Jefferson to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Jefferson later said that William Small had “probably fixed the destinies of my life.” William Small introduced Jefferson to the works of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke who became Jefferson’s heroes. Jefferson read voraciously in English, Greek, Latin, and French, pursuing works in philosophy, history, and science. Accordingly he acquired a skepticism – not only of the monarchical political institutions but also of the established Christian religion. From various philosophers he developed the conviction that answers to life’s questions came not by mystical revelation but through application of Reason.

Later in life, especially when he was running for President, Jefferson’s political opponents were to accuse him of atheism, and some called him an infidel. The atheist charge was not apt – as a man of Reason Jefferson said that no one could prove that there is no God. Perhaps agnostic is an apt description for Jefferson as the young skeptic. He wrote

in 1787, “Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blind fear.”

As Jefferson grew older he mellowed. In speeches and in letters he often referred to a divine being or source. While he usually avoided use of the word “God,” he often referred to “divine Providence,” “nature’s God,” “the Creator,” or “the Author of Our Being.” Perhaps the philosophical term *theist*, or possibly *deist*, fits him best.

Jefferson openly rejected the Trinitarian concept of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. He referred to this concept as “the platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three; and yet that the one is not three, and the three is not one... . But this constitutes the craft, the power, and the profit of the priests.” In preparing what has come to be known as the Jefferson Bible he makes it clear that he does not believe that Jesus was a divine person. He believed that Jesus’ miracles were exaggerations and inventions of later followers. As he wrote to Adams in 1814:

“The doctrines that 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 [New Testament and early church writing] can never be explained.” And later he wrote: “And the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”

But he did believe strongly in the ethical essence of Jesus’ teaching. Jefferson wrote: Jesus “moral doctrines relating to kindred and friends were more pure and perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers... .”

In his Presidency Jefferson remained true to his beliefs although it made him unpopular with the more devout. For example, he refused to endorse the government observance of religious and thanksgiving holidays. We owe to Jefferson, among other early patriots, the promotion of a “wall of separation” between church and state.

Despite the gradual mellowing of his skepticism as he aged, there is one constant theme with Jefferson: “The care of every man’s soul belongs to himself.” Although he was nominally Anglican and Episcopalian all of his life, he was very close to Unitarians like the Unitarian Minister and renowned scientist, Joseph Priestly. And Jefferson was very close to the Unitarians in belief as well. Our Unitarian Universalist church district is named the Thomas Jefferson District in honor of Jefferson’s Unitarian affinity. On one occasion Jefferson said: “There is not a young man living now in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” Oh, what optimism!

John Adams

John Adams, practical, serious, and often dour New Englander, is a striking contrast to the pleasure loving, social Virginian – Jefferson. Not so philosophical as Jefferson, Adams was a down-to-earth small-town lawyer. His early influence, unlike Jefferson’s Anglican environment, was inspired by the stern Calvinist and Puritan traditions of

Massachusetts – infused with the concept of man’s “original sin.” But, like Jefferson, Adams was well read. He immersed himself in the Greek and Roman writers whom he considered equal to the Biblical prophets. Adams came to consider the Bible to be only one of many inspired historical writings.

Adams had been encouraged by his family to go into the clergy rather than law. But, a practical man early on, he had a disdain for the clergy. Outspoken in his views he said,

“People are not disposed to inquire for piety, integrity, good sense or learning in a young preacher, but for stupidity (for so I must call the pretended sanctity of some absolute dunces) [and for] irresistible grace and original sin.”

This skeptical view of the clergy – but not necessarily of religion generally – persisted into his old age. At the age of 82 he wrote Jefferson: “Twenty times in the course of my late readings, have I been on the point of breaking out, ‘this would be the best of all worlds if there were no religion in it.’” But he went on to extol the apparent necessity of religion to encourage civilized behavior.

Like Jefferson, Adams believed in a benevolent God, but without all the trappings of the Christian religion. For example, with respect to eternal damnation he wrote,

“I believe in no such thing. ... My adoration of the author of the universe is too profound and too sincere. The love of God and his creation – delight, joy, triumph, exultation in my own existence – though but an atom ... in the universe – these are my religion.”

That sounds pretty *deist* to me. Adams’ ideas about Jesus, also like Jefferson’s, were tempered by his reliance on Reason. He expounded on the tradition of Jesus crucifixion:

“An incarnate God!! An eternal, self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient author of this stupendous universe, suffering on a cross!!! My soul starts with horror at the idea, and it has stupefied the Christian world. It has been the source of almost all the corruptions of Christianity.”

(How about Mel Gibson’s hot movie, *The Passion of the Christ*” that has so many ‘stupefied’ today.?)

I can see Adams also as an adherent to the Universalist tradition. In 1815 he wrote:

“Translations of the Bible into all languages and sent among all people, I hope, will produce translations into English and French, Spanish and German and Italian of the sacred books of Persians, the Chinese, the Hindoos, etc. etc. etc. Then our grandchildren and my great-grandchildren may compare notes and hold fast all that is good.”

Alf Mapp’s excellent book, *The Faiths of our Fathers*, from which I have borrowed liberally in this talk, concludes his study of John Adams, this way: “He devoted himself to a very elaborate examination of the religions of all ages and nations... . The issue of it was the

formation of his theological opinions very much in the mold accepted by the Unitarians of New England. Rejecting, with the independent spirit which in early life had driven him from the ministry, the prominent doctrines of Calvinism, the trinity, the atonement, and election, he was content to settle down upon the Sermon on the Mount as a perfect code presented to men by a more than mortal teacher.” Thus, at life’s end, he merged philosophically with the religious belief of his sometimes competitor and sometimes soul mate, Thomas Jefferson. Adam’s last gasp was to whisper the name of Jefferson.

What stands out when we look at the views of these historic giants on the subject of religion?

They both abhorred dogma.

They both were skeptical.

They were spiritual in the sense of constantly seeking a higher level of enlightenment.

They were not Christians in the sense of adhering to the traditional Christian creed.

But they both believed that the ethic of Jesus teaching was unsurpassed.

They both were unwilling to embrace religious doctrines that could not stand the test of rationality.

They both were willing to speak out against the dogmatists and the faith peddlers.

They both believed that Reason was the best guide and that each person was responsible for finding his own way.

They both found themselves, perhaps by default, very much in agreement with what we hold as the Unitarian Universalist religious tradition.

When we hear the founding fathers – and mothers – being used today to promote Christianity based on a literal reading of the Bible, or to promote pet causes like using public funds to support religious schools, advocating prayer in public schools, or posting the Ten Commandments in public places, we can know without doubt that the two founding fathers we have discussed today would not have let themselves be so used. Let us stand up for these dear departed mentors who have given us so much.

Bob Weekley

March 7, 2004