



The Radical Religion of Jefferson and Adams

Sermon by Rev. Alan Taylor
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Reading:

My reading for today is from a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787 who had asked for advice on pursuing religion. Jefferson responded:

Your reason is now mature enough to examine this object [religion]. In the first place, divest yourself of all bias in favor of novelty and singularity of opinion. Indulge them in any other subject rather than that of religion. It is too important, and the consequences of error may be too serious. On the other hand, shake off all the fears and servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. 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 blindfolded fear. ... Read the Bible as you would Livy or Tacitus. ... Examine upon what evidence [the writer's] pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change in the laws of nature, in the case he relates. For example, in the book of Joshua, we are told, the sun stood still several hours. ... You are astronomer enough to know how contrary it is to the law of nature that a body revolving on its axis, as the earth does, should have stopped, should not, by that sudden stoppage, have prostrated animals, trees, buildings, and should after a certain time have resumed its revolution, and that without a second general prostration. Is this arrest of the earth's motion, or the evidence which affirms it, most within the law of probabilities? You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out with pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law. ...

Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and

pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision. ...

Sermon:

Imagine that we are gathering together today in worship two hundred years ago. The year is not 2004 but 1804. Thomas Jefferson is in his fourth year as President, four years after barely ousted John Adams from gaining a second four-year term. The election of 1800 was bitter and full of vindictiveness, especially considering Thomas Jefferson served as vice-president under Adams. (It was a different system back then— whoever took the second most votes was entitled to be vice-president.) Needless to say, their political rivalry matched in any in history.

I didn't know until reading the McCullough biography of John Adams that Adams and Jefferson, when younger, were close friends while ambassadors to Europe, working together toward peace with Britain and trade treaties with France. For a time, Adams' son John Quincy studied and lived with Jefferson. Later the Adams' took in Jefferson's daughter Polly.

Adams and Jefferson were arguably the two most effective leaders through the formation of our country. The two men had great affection for one another until they headed the two rival political parties. By 1802, Jefferson and Adams weren't communicating at all. Yet their friendship would be re-ignited not long after Jefferson left office. Brewing within them both were religious convictions that could overcome political hostilities, even political betrayal. Their renewed friendship would revolve around religion and culminate in a fascinating religious document of American history, now known as the Jefferson Bible. Today I will offer a backdrop of the religious views of Adams and Jefferson, reflect on what went into the creation of the Jefferson Bible, and question what significance this has for us.

Upon leaving the capital, the ousted John Adams returned home to Quincy, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston, where he attended a Unitarian Church. Now Unitarianism hadn't become institutionalized, but it was spreading quickly. It was a faith in reason that broke with the orthodox Christian position. The Unitarians proclaimed that Jesus was not God but instead an extraordinary teacher and prophet, that the teaching of Jesus should be embraced but the teachings about Jesus should not. This faith tradition held that the human mind is a god-given faculty meant to be used to discern truth. Most of the nation's founders were of this opinion. They were called deists. They believed God made the world according to the physical laws of the universe that

wouldn't ever be violated, and so they pooh-poohed the idea of a supernatural God who could intervene in the laws of the universe. Religion instead was about human beings cultivating their minds and conscience so they could live according to our God-given moral reason.

Adams was known for pushing the envelope when it comes to religious beliefs. One of his favorite essays on religion was written by Thomas Paine just before Paine died. It was called "Age of Reason," and Adams was responsible for its publication. It read in part, "But there are times when men... begin to doubt the [literal] truth of the Christian religion; and well they may, for it is too fanciful and too full of conjecture, inconsistency, improbability and irrationality, to afford consolation to the thoughtful man. His reason revolts against his creed. He sees that none of its articles are proved, or can be proved." Regarding the view that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, Paine calls such an interpretation "laughable" and terms "Mystery, Miracle, and Prophecy" the "foundations of fraud".

Thomas Jefferson was a bit more of a religious enigma, as he kept his views to his personal diaries and never disclosed them in his public writings. I don't believe Jefferson came by his religious views simply through education. He knew human anguish. Four of his six children died before the age of ten. He tended his ill wife for several years, before she too died when Jefferson was 39. He grieved for months and then set upon a path that would alter the course of human history—for that is what he felt was the true religion, participating in civic life to change the world for the better.

When Jefferson had been a candidate for the presidency, emotionally-charged factions, reviled him as a godless infidel. Jefferson confided to Benjamin Rush, "They believe that my portion of power confided to me, will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." These last words now grace the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC. "I have sworn upon the alter of God, eternal hostility against every tyranny over the mind of man."

When Jefferson's neighbor, Robert Skipwith, asked him for a recommended list of books "befitting the dignity of a Virginia gentleman," Jefferson offered suggestions under various headings, including separate headings for Religion and History. The Bible he listed under the category of history, not religion. Under religion he listed philosophers like Hume and Socrates. Jefferson scoffed at the notion of the Bible being inerrant or infallible.

His two closest friends with whom he corresponded about religion were Joseph Priestley and Benjamin Rush. Priestley, was the celebrated British scientist that discovered oxygen. Priestley had led the Unitarian movement in Britain and was literally chased out after his house was burned down. Jefferson convinced him to live near him. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and celebrated physician, was a leading American Universalist. Given his two closest spiritual advisors and correspondents, it is worth asking the question, was Thomas Jefferson a Unitarian or a

Universalist? Technically he was neither, he didn't belong to a church. But he did consider himself a rational Christian and chose to pursue his religious studies in the quiet solitude of his study and through rich correspondence with his closest friends. He was a lone religious liberal in Charlottesville in a sea of evangelicals, effectively arguing for the separation of church and state. In a letter to a pioneer in Ohio he wrote, "I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its conscience to neither kings or priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."

If only it were so!

Jefferson very much wanted to see his country follow the teachings of Jesus but he didn't want people to fall under what he called the "corruptions of Christianity." He saw that folks like Benjamin Rush and Joseph Priestley helped reestablish liberal Christianity as a viable option for "reasonable and "enlightened" Americans.

When Jefferson came up with the idea to condense the wisdom of the Gospels into a coherent little book, he wrote to Priestley telling him he was the man to do it. Whether Priestley received the letter is not known, for he died a week after the letter was sent. It was 1805. Priestley's death prompted Jefferson to take a razor blade to two Bibles and over the course of two evenings, he cut and pasted what he called his "wee little book, The Philosophy of Jesus." He included most of Jesus' teachings but excluded the virgin birth, the miracles, and the resurrection. It wasn't the study he imagined, with several translations, but it was a first attempt. Incidentally, he was the President of the United States.

As a Virginian, Jefferson was understandably concerned that his religious views might become public if any of his letters to the now deceased Priestley were published. Sure enough, it happened, but with a highly unexpected consequence. John Adams, read it in 1820, and though his political nemesis, Adams immediately wrote Jefferson several letters expressing how much he agreed with him.

With politics behind them, Adams and Jefferson became correspondents, with religion one of the significant topics. Their dialogue further fueled Jefferson's stance on the separation of church and state vis-à-vis the surging movements of evangelical Christians. Upon learning that Jefferson had cut and pasted pieces of the gospels in the past and had hoped to do a more thorough job of it, Adams wrote repeatedly urging him to finish his project. Finally 15 years after the first cut and paste job, Jefferson pored over six translations again with a blade and finished "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," or as is called today, The Jefferson Bible. Jefferson wrote to other friends that it was Adams' "stubborn nagging" that got him to complete his work.

Religious conservatives today argue that the nation's founders were good Christian brothers who believed like them that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and that they looked to Jesus as their savior. That is blasphemy. Our nation's founders were highly

educated with far more faith in the ideals of the Enlightenment than in religious rhetoric about sin, resurrection, or future salvation. Jefferson and Adams honestly thought a faith that urged people to use their minds to inform their souls would become the nation's primary religion. Two hundred years ago they were sold on the idea, and today it is still an important message: think for yourself, study to make yourself wiser, discern what is true, and don't take anybody's word for how you should live, not a king or a priest—but consult your own conscience.

I must confess the irony is not lost on me that I am preaching today about the Jefferson Bible and I am talking solely about Jefferson and Adams and not exploring the wisdom within the Bible, the whole reason Jefferson undertook his task. It must be acknowledged that the Bible simply doesn't sit well with many Unitarian Universalists. But is that any reason to shirk the truths that are within it?

If we don't look to the Bible or the Gospels as a most inspired set of texts, what are our guideposts for life? What teachings do we turn to? If we cannot answer this question, then our faith does not have much depth. Thomas Jefferson, in his endeavor to take a razor to the Bible may at first blush appear as a criticism of Christianity, it really stands as a challenge to us.

A former parishioner once asked me, "Is Unitarian Universalism a cut and paste faith?" I responded, "If so, is that a good thing?" Do we simply take what we want and leave behind what we don't? Who are we to cut and paste what we like in a religion and ignore what we don't? I've given it some thought. And yes, we are a cut and paste faith. And is it a good thing? It depends on what we cut and paste, and why.

Christianity and Judaism are also at core cut and paste faiths. At some point someone cut and pasted their sacred scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures have four different sources spliced together, the Jehova, Elohim, Priestly, and Deuteronomic traditions. The New Testament is a collection of writings determined at the Council of Nicaea in 325 when it was decided what books would be in and what books would be out. Even the gospels themselves went through re-writes, and Luke and Matthew are clearly cut and paste jobs from at least two other documents, from Mark and an undiscovered text that biblical scholars call the Q document.

What Thomas Jefferson did wasn't all that different from what religious reformers through the ages have always done: he sought to separate the wheat from the chaff. Because Thomas Jefferson was no biblical scholar, it's good to ask "Who is Jefferson to cut and paste from the Bible?" His own person to clarify for himself the truth of life. His faith in thinking for himself, his education, his vast experience, and his clarity within himself over what is right and what is wrong.

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, two revolutionary figures of our nation, arch-rivals when it came to politics, but on the subject of religion, they were united. As they aged, Americans wondered who would live longer, who would have the last laugh. Well,

perhaps it was mere coincidence, but Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died within an hour of each other, on the same day, July 4th, 1826.

They left to the world a young nation based on freedom and independence, and an example of how to be religious in the world: Fix reason firmly in her seat, call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God, read the Bible as you would historians of old, and study moral and religious teaching so as to clarify for ourselves what is truly important.

May we carry forth in our own lives the faith of our nation's founders and be able to say with Jefferson, "We are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

May it be so.

Amen.