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Sunday Sermon: “The Religion of John Adams and John Quincy Adams”

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The religion of the John and John Quincy would not be found in any of our current churches. It would not be found in those fledgling Universalist Churches of that era. Their religion was, however, progressive in its age. The Church of the Presidents in Quincy was founded in 1639. Adams' forbearers were founding members. The Quincy church was first ministered by John Wheelwright. A member there, Anne Hutchinson were banished from Massachusetts after one year for teaching freedom of thought and the rights of individual conscience. The church joined the Unitarian revolution and rejected its dismal Calvinist view of humankind in 1750 when John was 15, but still hadn't moved to the idea of Universal Salvation. About that time the First Parish church of Quincy called a young Harvard graduate named Lemuel Briant. He stopped teaching the youth of the parish catechism and encouraged their study of Scripture. This minister stressed individual conscience and the use of human reason in analyzing Scripture.

Other Congregational clergy called Briant's ministry heresy. They called him to a regional council for censure. He refused to come. The Parish Council supported the minister saying “his free and impartial examination of all the articles of our Holy Religion so that all may judge even of themselves what is right.”

During the 18th century the argument for a Unitarian rather than Trinitarian view of God was based on biblical sources. The idea of the Trinity has its original roots in the tradition of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation took Trinitarianism with it. Anglicanism in the 18th century questioned the Trinity. At one time one third of all Anglican priests were Unitarian in their beliefs. King's Chapel in Boston was Episcopal kept a Unitarian Theology. As more and more Congregational clergy studied biblical sources, they came to the conclusion that on biblical authority the concept of the Trinity was questionable. The Universalists hung onto Trinitarian thought a bit longer. In 1815 John wrote a response to a pamphlet titled “American Unitarianism” in which the word “Unitarian” was meant to be an insult. He took the opposite position. The Quincy Church was one of the 120 founding churches of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

In Britain the primary advocate on this biblical-based Unitarianism was Joseph Priestley. He brought his arguments with him when he immigrated to Philadelphia in 1794. Many of our founding fathers attended his services. The Universalist Benjamin Rush attended many of Priestley's services, others included were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. They had a falling out over support for the French revolution. Over support for the French revolution Priestley was driven out of England. John and his son John Quincy were two different types of Unitarians. John Senior embraced the Deist or clock maker theology of the eighteenth century, but John Quincy worshipped a Christian Unitarianism like Channing, which rejected the dismal Calvinist model for humanity.

For the last 20 years of their lives, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson communicated with each other by letter and became great friends again. In many of their letters they developed and explained their Unitarianism to each other. Both Adams and Jefferson were Deists. This theology has been called the clock makers theology. They both claimed that God created a world and put in motion and then stepped back.

John Adams' biographer, David McCollough, calls him "simple, pious, and Christian." When John Adams entered college he intended to become a minister, but rejected the orthodoxy of his day which was the conservative Puritan or Calvinism of the Congregationalists, so rather than be a Calvinist minister he became a Lawyer. Theologically he rejected predestination, and supported free will. "These religious ideas influenced his politics in later life.

His minister at First Church as he was growing up preached Arminianism. This was an early Unitarianism that considered Jesus as a lesser figure to God. His early writing denied the Doctrine of the Trinity. Three years before his death in 1826 John Adams declared that he attended many churches, but he preferred the one denomination which favored Unitarianism. As a supporter of religious freedom his last public act at age 85 in 1821 was to attempt to amend the Massachusetts Constitution to allow religious freedoms especially to Jews.

Adams also was in the camp of William Ellery Channing who considered themselves Unitarian Christians.

As president in 1797 John Adams delivered the Treaty of Tripoli to the Senate for approval. It contained the statement, "The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion," which was accepted without amendment. This sentiment would resound with our 21st century congregations. John Quincy left an ode to his parents' values etched in the wall of their church meeting. It said, "Pilgrim, Let Freedom, Friendship, Faith, they Soul engage, And serve like them thy Country and thy Age."

His son John Quincy Adams was named after his great-grandfather John Quincy who was the essential New Englander of his day and "remarkable for never praising anybody." He was raised in his ancestor's church but was not a Deist like his father. He was influenced by his mother Abigail, a great early feminist. This religion played out in his life and especially in his public life.

As a boy he stayed with his mother when his father was about his business of the new nation. He was an early scholar and studied for public service. At ten he read the "History of the Peloponnesian Wars" in Greek.

In 1778 John Adams was sent by the Continental Congress with Franklin to Paris and he took young Johnny. Here his studies expanded to Latin and French as well as Mathematics and Drawing. At 13 he, speaking Dutch, went to the great University at Leydan. At 14 he became an interpreter and secretary to the American minister at the Russian Court of Catherine the Great. In 1784 he sadly left the education at the great Universities of Europe to attend a small local college on the banks of the Charles.

At 21 John Quincy graduated and began a lifelong battle with depression. Shortly after his series of newspaper articles were seen by the new President Washington and he was sent to Holland as minister. He continued the post until he was recalled by his father when Jefferson won the Presidency in 1800. In 1802 he entered elected politics as a state and later United States Senator.

The three-year old city of Washington of 1804 was but a swamp with a population of 4000. He entered another bout of depression, but was elected to a newly created Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard College.

Meanwhile his Federalist party removed him from the Senate and he had to split his time between Harvard and a law practice. He then received a diplomatic appointment to Russia then as minister to Great Britain.

Then in 1816 he was appointed as Secretary of State under President Monroe. In this capacity he extended the Union to the West Coast. As Secretary of State John Quincy Adams was next in line for the presidency of 1824 and lost to Jackson in the popular vote and the electoral college but carried the election as the Sixth President because the House voted when no candidate won the majority.

His presidency was equally confusing and dissatisfying to the country as well as to Adams. He greatly wanted to expose the horror of slavery but did not have the majority to enact anything against "outrage upon the goodness of God."

Once with his secretary he took a boat out into the Potomac to swim. The boat sank leaving Adams swimming in his pantaloons. He lent these to his secretary who went back for a coach. For five hours the naked president waited on a rock for the carriage. So you see Washington lunacy hasn't really changed much.

John Quincy sought solace from depression in Religion and attended three services on Sunday, Unitarian, Presbyterian, and Episcopal. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence July 4th 1826 its two main authors, his father and Thomas Jefferson died. He returned home to bury his father and mother in a newly constructed crypt under the Quincy Church where it lays today.

The election of 1828 found Andrew Jackson in the Whitehouse and found John Quincy back in Boston. At Bicentennial Celebration of Boston's founding, Adams met Rev. Richardson, the Unitarian Minister of Hingham's Old Ship and Quincy's Congressman. The church had been pressuring their minister to leave public service and asked if he would consider taking the seat. Adams rejected the offer pleading age and a desire to get back to Scholarship. He was elected. This was the seat he held to his death twenty years later.

At this time Adams avoided an active stance on Abolition. For many in the north especially those with strong business ties, the evil of slavery was presented as a necessity of commerce. Many Unitarians of this period held this view. Even Channing at this period had not fully embraced the cause.

At 65 years old in his new position Adams became famous as Old Man Eloquent on the house floor. By 1836 he became the house voice against slavery. The house adopted a procedure which became known as the Gag rule. This procedure tabled without any floor discussion any petition which dealt with the issue of slavery. His battle against slavery became his calling. He was also responsible for establishment of a willed estate collection from an Englishman named Smithson to the People of the United States.

That same year saw the election of Martin Van Buren as President who was pro-South in his sentiments. Adams developed many tactics to circumvent the gag rule and bring anti-slavery petitions to the house. He had evolved from the *Venerable Gentleman from Massachusetts* to the *Madman from Massachusetts* in his opposition to the Admission of Texas as a slave state. This issue was significant in loss of Van Buren of the 1840 Presidential election.

Adams was approached about the Supreme Court defense of 39 Mende people from West Africa. The movie Amistad we saw Friday.

Adams was familiar with the case having started and chaired a house committee that looked into the Cuban Slave-Laundering. It would be a difficult court since all but one Judge was a slave holder himself. The judges were unfriendly to Adams. The chief Justice Taney Adams had once tried to impeach Adams. Justice Story occupied a position on the court that Adams had been offered.

Justice McLean had been Adams Postmaster General but had left him for Jackson. Justice Barbour once called Adams "a shallow-pated wildcat, fit for nothing but to tear the Union to rags and tatters." Adams accepted the challenge reluctantly.

In March 1841 the case went to court in the Court Chambers below the Senate. The main case was handled by Baldwin, but Adams presented two days of summation. The first day he talked for 4 and 1/2 hours. The next day when he was to finish Justice Barbour died, so the case was delayed. When it resumed Adams spoke for an additional four hours.

Addressing the Judges on returning Adams states: "May it please your honors: On the seventh of February, 1804 now more than thirty-seven years past, my name was entered and yet stands recorded on the rolls as one of the attorneys and counselors of this court. Five years later, in February and March of 1809, I appeared for the last time before this court in defense of the cause of justice. Very

shortly afterward, I was called to discharge other duties—first in distant lands, and in later years within our own country. Little did I imagine that I should ever again be required to the right of appearing in the capacity of an officer of this court. Yet such has been the dictate of destiny, and I appear again to plead the cause of justice, and now of liberty and life...I stand before this same court, but not before the same judges. As I cast my eyes along those seats of honor and of public trust, now occupied by you, they seek in vain for one those honored and able persons whose indulgence listened then to my voice. Marshall, Cushing, Washington, Johnson, Livingston, Todd. Where are they? Alas! Where is one of the very judges of this court, arbiter of life and death, before whom I commenced this anxious argument? Where are they? Gone! Gone! Gone from the services which in their day and generation they faithfully rendered to their country. I humbly hope, and fondly trust, that they have gone to receive the reward of blessing on high. In taking this, my final leave of this bar, and of this court, I can only ejaculate a fervent petition to heaven, that every member of it may go to his final account with as little of earthly frailty to answer for as those illustrious dead, and that you may, everyone, after the close of a long and victorious career in this world, be received at the portals of the next with approving sentences.^[1] "Well done, good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of the Lord." On March 8th Justice Story read the verdict with only one in opposition, "There does not seem to us to be any ground for doubt that these... are to be deemed free."

In 1848 John Quincy suffered a stroke and returned to congress but severely impaired. Daniel Webster tells of his last meeting with Adams: "Someone, a friend of his, came in and made particular inquiry of his health. Adams answered, "I inhabit a weak, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds and broken in upon by the storms, and from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair."

He died of the stroke while in the House Chamber. His last words to the court could be his epithet, "Well done, good and faithful servant." May we all wish for such an epithet.

In an ever evolving and never ending world. Amen.

^[1] John and Kathyne Favors, John Quincy Adams and the Amistad, (Oakland, CA : Jonka Enterprises, 1974) 21.