

Comment

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At the outset, I should make it clear that my primary objective in offering the following remarks is not to critique the papers on this morning's session, but more broadly to provide a comment to stimulate our discussion. To my mind, each of the pieces on our panel has individual merits and there are also things I might have done differently, but I want us to look at the four contributions collectively—as an avenue into a discussion of the relationship between religion and the libraries of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and thus as potential contributors to a conversation—rather than as separate voices engaged however easily or uneasily in side-by-side monologues. Our goal for the remainder of our two hours, then, is to think about the interaction between the libraries of Adams and Jefferson and their religious lives—both beliefs and actions. We need to consider such questions as how did our subjects' reading and collecting influence their spiritual lives? To turn the question around, how did it reflect their spiritual lives? And how did the relationship between religious readings, beliefs, and actions compare with similar intersections in other areas, for example political philosophy and government. I don't have all the answers to these questions, and I suspect that no one else here does, either. I put these puzzles forward to you now, though, as an appropriate agenda for the remainder of this session.

For the next minute or two I'd like to take you back in time. It's a winter's evening, probably in late 1804 or early 1805. We are in the White House. An

angular man with a ruddy complexion sits at a table, two copies of the King James Version of the Bible in front of him. He is slicing pieces of text from the scriptures. Eventually, he will arrange them in an order of his own devising and paste the fragments into a blank book. We are watching Thomas Jefferson working on the first version of his famous “Bible,” so called, a compilation of the Gospel texts he deemed the authentic philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth. Some years from now, after the end of his second term as president, he will take up the project once again, this time adding New Testament texts in Latin, Greek, and French to those in English. In each instance his objective is to prune away what he considers to be distractions—extraneous comments from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that have found their way into the Gospels—comments that Jefferson believes tell us more about the interpreters of Jesus than about either the man himself or his faith. Jefferson would have it that what is left after excising the interjections of latter-day commentators offers us our best insight into the true beliefs of the Nazarene.

Jefferson’s Bible—he called the final version “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French, & English”—was not published until 1904, almost a century after its compilation and it can hardly be said to have influenced American thought during his own lifetime. It is to the exercise, however, and not to the compilation’s possible influence, that I want to draw your attention this morning. For in finding what he approved of in the New Testament and setting aside the rest, Thomas Jefferson was performing what was both for him and for John Adams the most typical of acts when it came to readings on religion. Both men cared deeply about

the questions that are at the heart of religion—particularly the matters of morals that received pride of place in Jefferson’s Bible—and in their extensive libraries each devoted substantial space to works on these subjects. But if the four papers that form the assigned reading for this session have a common message with regard to their libraries it is that neither man ordinarily acquired these works out of intellectual curiosity or engagement. It appears that by and large they did not read in the works of the best theologians of their day specifically in order to test themselves against systems of thought they found novel or persuasive or alarming, although they did read some of these writers. No, instead of fodder for inquiring minds, cud for them to chew over, the religious books and pamphlets that found their way into the presidential libraries at the Old House in Quincy and not far from here at Monticello provided ammunition at a time of heated religious controversies—evidence to make cases they already accepted, and not to create fresh doctrines.

We have marvelous tools at our disposal to analyze the religion sections of the libraries of Adams and Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson provided his own index in Chapter 17 of his catalog of his library, the section on religion, as well as to small sections on ecclesiastical law and church history. If we go digital and turn to the free website Library Thing we can learn without having to count them for ourselves that he owned about 300 religious titles. Meanwhile, the library of John Adams, now housed under Beth Prindle’s supervision at the Boston Public Library, held 235 titles in its religion section according to the online catalog. Such a wealth of resources in each case might have led to deep inquiry into matters spiritual—inquiry of which Adams and Jefferson were both well capable

if they were so inclined. I strongly suspect that each man had much more extensive holdings on religious subjects than most of the clergy who were their Congregationalist, Unitarian, Anglican, or Episcopal contemporaries. Similarly rich collections on political philosophy and government led Adams and Jefferson to the system-building—the development of political theory and structures of government—that are our subjects' enduring bequests to the American people. But from what we know about both of them, it is clear that these libraries did nothing of the sort when it came to religion. One of the puzzles we need to address in this session is why religion was sufficiently important to each man to lead him to collect very actively in the subject for his library but, in the end, insufficiently important to induce him to make a creative contribution to American religious life on a par with his contributions to the American polity.

This morning's papers take a firm point of view on the role of religious writings in the lives of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Listen to Frank Lambert quoting Adams. After a lifetime of reading shelves full of books on religion and philosophy Adams concluded, Lambert tells us, that "they have made no Change in my moral or religious Creed, which has for 50 or 60 years been contained in four short Words '*Be just and good.*'"¹ As for Jefferson, in somewhat the same vein as Lambert John Ragosta judges that in the campaign for the adoption of Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, the religious achievement in which he took the greatest pride, "success was not the result of erudite intellectual arguments . . . based on Enlightenment rationalism," that is, the sort of lessons Thomas might have learned in his library, its shelves groaning with the

¹ Lambert, p. 17.

tomes of philosophes. Instead, Ragosta tells us, we can find the story of the passage of the statute in the normal workings of the political system—that is to say we can find it in “the political support of the dissenters” of Virginia.²

Although this session’s papers address different aspects of the religious lives of Adams and Jefferson, two common lessons from our authors connect the essays to one another. If we want to understand their religious lives we need to recognize, first, the overriding importance of context. And second, we need to allow ourselves as we investigate the spiritual lives of two of their generation’s most subtle political thinkers to concede that their faith did not rest on metaphysical niceties, for example the complicated spinning of theories of the sort that attracted some of their contemporaries—notably the New Divinity progeny of Jonathan Edwards—but rather on a few basic precepts no more sophisticated than we teach our children today in kindergarten. I’m talking about precepts such as the one the Book of Micah summarized as follows: “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.”³

What do I mean by my first point, the importance of context? The central theme of Connie Schulz’s contribution to this session encompasses an important piece of my message. In “Train up a Child in the Way He Should Go” we learn that both for Adams and for Jefferson childhood religious training established the parameters of adult religious beliefs. In Adams’s case, as Schulz shows us, religious instruction took place at home in the family, at school, and at church.

² Ragosta, p. 12.

³ Micah 6:8.

Such influences could certainly produce orthodox Calvinists in rural New England in the eighteenth century, but nothing in what we know about Adams's family or schooling suggests very doctrinaire influences. Keep in mind that Braintree's minister during his adolescence, Lemuel Briant, belonged to the first generation of New England Arminians—the more liberal of the two religious parties that descended from the Puritans—and that when Briant encountered objections to the beliefs he preached Adams's father, a deacon of the church in Braintree's North Parish, helped to protect his minister against orthodox critics. Skeptical of the doctrine of Original Sin and open to teachings that—unlike orthodox Calvinism—allowed a sinner a role in securing his own salvation, Briant preached a liberal faith in Braintree's North Parish. This was the kind of teaching, apparently acceptable to his parents, which John Adams imbibed. Philip Goff fairly characterizes the doctrines in favor in Braintree's North Parish as "Country Arminianism," a faith more marked by broad, humane religious precepts than fine-spun logic. Whatever we call it, the influence was sufficiently strong that when Adams graduated from college he believed at first that his professional destination was the pulpit.

Thomas Jefferson's rural Anglican upbringing, meanwhile—consisting of lessons from his parents, tutors, and ministers—afforded him no unconventional influences but very little in the way of sophisticated doctrines. It is revealing, as Schulz tells us, that unlike in New England, where parents regularly brought squirming, bored children to Sunday meeting, and where eventually they might absorb the faith of their fathers and mothers, in Virginia young children were left home. It might be asking too much to expect most young New England boys and

girls to understand the sermons to which they were regularly subjected each Sunday morning and afternoon, but in the Virginia of Thomas Jefferson's childhood even spiritually and intellectually precocious children stayed home and were denied whatever possibility there might have been to breathe in mature and sophisticated versions of Anglican doctrine.

Indeed from their earliest years onward, theology had fairly little to do with the most significant lessons both men took away about religion. Rather than systematic theology, the lesson related to religion that was most available to them may have been the susceptibility of the clergy to controversies and petty bickering. From the controversies that pitted friends and foes of the Great Awakening against one another John Adams learned that he had no taste for such squabbles, while Jefferson had a front row seat to the Parsons' Cause, a dispute over pay for Anglican ministers that focused Virginian attention during Jefferson's adolescence on church politics, not matters of faith or doctrine.

With some preliminary thoughts about the place, or lack of place, of sophisticated theology in the thought and works of Adams and Jefferson it is time now to take at least a brief look at the religious books in the two presidents' libraries. If, as the foregoing has suggested, careful consideration of these books does not appear to have affected Adams and Jefferson's spiritual lives substantially, it's interesting to note that two men who arrived at fairly comparable views had rather different religious collections on their shelves. Of course, both owned multiple copies of the Bible, and as those of us who were in Boston learned from Ted Widmer's keynote talk at the Boston Public Library on Sunday, remarkably each owned a copy of the Koran. Beyond these basic points

of similarity, however, in their collecting the two men went in different directions. Adams—naturally pugnacious, notwithstanding his decision shortly after college to sidestep religious controversy—put together an advocate’s section on religion. To be more specific, he put together an Arminian’s or a Unitarian’s advocate’s library. To be sure, there were certain Puritan classics—Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Samuel Willard’s orthodox systematic theology *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, and a work by John Calvin, although not the *Institutes*. More in keeping with Adams’s own time, here we find two copies of *Sacred Poetry*, the hymnal by Jeremy Belknap, the late minister of what is now Arlington Street Church, one of the more prominent Arminian and then Unitarian churches in Boston and, I should add, the primary founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society. There are also quite a few books by other leading Arminian and Unitarian spokesmen of Adams’s day—Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, and Henry Ware, Jr. We also have *A View of Religions* by Adams’s distant cousin Hannah Adams, one of the first Americans to study comparative religion and one of the first American women to try to make a living through her writing. It is interesting to find a couple of sermons by Hosea Ballou, an early Universalist leader more than 130 years before merger united the Unitarians and the Universalists. In Adams’s times, most New Englanders found Universalists such as Ballou more than a bit disreputable. We also encounter standard writings by some of the eighteenth-century Anglicans whose sermons and other works were widely read among the religious liberals of eastern Massachusetts—men such as Joseph Butler and John Tillotson. And there are works by Joseph Priestley the Unitarian spokesman and chemist originally from

England who moved to Philadelphia as well as three titles by Voltaire—notably one with the immodest title *La Bible Enfin Expliquée*, that is, *The Bible Finally Explained*.

Equally noteworthy are some of the authors we don't find in Adams's library. There's nothing by Jonathan Edwards or his most important hyper-Calvinist disciples, Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins. Nor anything by Jedidiah Morse or Jeremiah Evarts—from the Unitarian perspective the two most loathsome spokesmen for religious orthodoxy in turn-of-the-century New England. What use would such authors be to Adams, after all? Of orthodox writers of his own day, the two most interesting figures are Samuel Niles, the minister of Braintree's conservative South Parish and the father of a hyper-Calvinist follower of Jonathan Edwards, and Abiel Holmes, the orthodox minister in Cambridge until 1829, when his congregation divided angrily between Calvinists and Unitarians. If he is remembered at all today, Holmes's modern claim to fame is as the father of doctor and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, the "Autocrat at the Breakfast Table," and the grandfather of Mr. Justice Holmes. Abiel Holmes would hardly have been happy had he anticipated that his descendants would follow a liberal religious path—which they did.

If Adams's religious holdings were those of a theologically liberal advocate, I'd characterize Jefferson's as somewhat more inclined toward the history of theology from St. Augustine of Hippo onward. There are multiple copies in a variety of languages the New Testament—important for Jefferson's work on his Bible. There are Anglican texts, including the *Book of Common Prayer*—no doubt a consequence of Jefferson's upbringing as well as the predominance of

Episcopalians in his Virginia social circle. One finds an odd assortment of official publications by Baptist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian associations. Eighteenth-century English Latitudinarians are represented by six titles by Samuel Clarke and a collection of the *Works* of John Tillotson. The collection also has its share of pamphlet sermons, often by theological moderates preaching on public occasions. These last may have been presentation copies that Jefferson decided to keep, and not works that he went out and bought.

Jefferson also owned a full assortment of the works of Joseph Priestly—eleven of them including titles such as *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* as well as *An History of Early Opinions of Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers, Proving that the Christian Church Was at First Unitarian*. Once again, as in Adams's case, there is little sign in Jefferson's library of the modern voices of religious orthodoxy—no Edwards here, either—but we do find William Emerson (the father of Ralph Waldo Emerson), the Reverend William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts, a rare Unitarian who was also a Jeffersonian politically, and the printed *Constitutional Rules of the Society of Unitarians of Philadelphia*.

Well, in the context of the assigned readings for this session, what are we to make of the religious holdings of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. I'll repeat the proposition with which I began this comment—that the religious books that Adams collected were for bolstering their efforts at advocacy and those in Jefferson's library focused on historical theology. Neither collected, however, to engage in a quest for theological truth.

And yet my remarks this morning hardly prove my thesis. They don't do much more than simply state my case. One might equally, for example, try to argue that the Deism of Thomas Jefferson was the product of philosophical inquiry, and thus contend for a philosophical or theological basis to the Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom. Yet—John Ragosta—you maintain without actually demonstrating it that Virginia politics, not ideas were the makings of the Statute. You've made the case for its political origins. How would you make the case against its philosophical or theological origins?