**Delight, Joy, Triumph, Exaltation: The Religion of John Adams**

**John Adams was a New Englander by ancestry and a Yankee by conviction. He was no cosmopolitan and could be self-conscious of his provincial roots. He was out-of-place amid the polished diplomats of Europe. Yet at the same time, he was immensely proud of his rustic, hardscrabble pedigree. Refinements were superfluous to character, even if that character (like Adams’ own) happened to be somewhat curmudgeonly and cantankerous.**

**Appointed as American minister to Britain after the War for Independence, he delighted in confounding one of the foreign ministers who welcomed him to London. It was a tense interview, for Adams had been a ringleader in the thirteen colonies’ rebellion against the Crown. Now the former enemies had to find a way to be cordial to each other. “You have often been in England?” he was asked politely. The American responded in the negative.**

**“You have relations here, no doubt?”**

**“None at all.”**

**“How can that be? You are of English extraction?  
“Neither my father or mother, grandfather or grandmother, great-grandfather or great-grandmother, nor any other relation that I know of, or care a farthing for, has been in England these one hundred and fifty years, so that you see I have not one drop of blood in my veins but what is American,” Adams asserted proudly.**

**The fields were stony on the northern coasts, but Adams was partial to his native land. Thirft, simple living and a lack of ostentation were the bedrock of small town life in Massachusetts and almost synonymous with virtue in Adam’s mind. The home where he grew up was modest, a two story clapboard farmhouse with central chimney and fireplace to provide heat for the four rooms where the family lived. John and his two brothers slept in cubbies under the eves. Virtually any man might obtain a small freehold in Massachusetts, Adams noted with approval, which meant practically anyone could vote. A homespun equality prevailed, socially and economically.**

**In theory, Adams believed that a natural hierarchy existed in society. Some people would always possess intellect and ability that distinguished them from the herd, and governments that failed to acknowledge this fact were in trouble. In considering the Constitution, he argued for a strong chief of state, and to his regret, he even used the word ‘monarch’ to describe this executive role. For suggesting Washington ought to have a title capable of inspiring suitable awe for the office (Adams suggested “His Highness, President of the United States and Protector of the Liberties of the Same”), the portly patriot was jeered as “His Rotundity” by his enemies in Congress. Jefferson called the proposed title “the most superlatively ridiculous thing I ever heard of,” recalling Ben Franklin’s assessment of Aams as “always an honest man and often a just one, but sometimes absolutely mad.”**

**Yet in practice, Adams was an instinctive democrat. He deplored finery and frippery, which bred decadence. “Luxury, wherever she goes, effaces from human nature the image of Divinity,” disposing people toward hedonism and sensuality rather than useful service. Heading up a three-person commission to negotiate commercial treaties with France, he joined Jefferson and Franklin, the other members of the trio, outside Paris. His compatriots fit right into high society, but John and Abigail found their house too big for their tastes. Though overlooking a medieval castle with a view of the river Seine, both just wanted to go home.**

**They yearned for the idylls of family life – “Tis domestic happiness and rural felicity in the bosom of my native land that has charms for me,” Abigail asserted—and their frequent separations produced a lifelong series of love letters as notable for their literary quality as for their simmering passion. She managed the homestead in John’s absence. Single parenting was no easier then than now, but Abigail also superintended the children’s education, following her husband’s exhortations to “Train them to virtue. Habituate them to industry, activity and spirit.” Doubtless, John hoped to replicate the kind of upbringing he’d experienced as a child.**

**As a boy, he’d wanted nothing more than to be a farmer. His father, seeking to instill higher aspirations into his son, had taken the youngster with him for a wet, muddy, backbreaking day cutting bundles of thatching. That night the senior Adams challenged his son – “Well, John, are you satisfied with being a farmer?” “Yes sir, I like it very much,” the lad replied. His father had other plans for him, but John’s stubborn capacity for hard work would take him far.**

**His forbears had settled in Braintree, a small village a few miles south of Boston, just ten years after the Puritans established their ‘city on a hill.” Adams was baptized into the faith in 1735 in a plain, box-like meetinghouse that dominated the town much as the stern tenets of the religion dominated the minds of its inhabitants. In Dame Belcher’s schoolhouse, he absorbed his catechism:**

**There is a dreadful fiery hell**

**Where wicked ones must always dwell;**

**There is a heaven full of joy**

**Where goodly ones must always stay;**

**To one of these my soul must fly**

**As in a moment when I die.**

**Though he abandoned most of what was in his lesson books, the reality of sin continued to color Adam’s view of the world throughout his life. He knew that people could be vain, selfish and frequently short-sighted—human beings were a fallen race—and he sometimes wrote in terms that recalled his religious upbringing. “To expect self-denial from men, when they have a majority in their favor, and consequently power to gratify themselves, is to disbelieve all history and universal experience.” Checks and balances were needed to keep arrogance within limits—to protect the minority from the majority and the individual from the mob.**

**He felt crowds of people could be dangerous—like the throng that began pelting British sentries with rocks and snowballs in 1770, leading to the Boston massacre. As an attorney, Adams defended the soldiers in court and managed to convince a jury the Redcoats had fired in self-defense. Though he was no friend of occupying armies, he was equally opposed to street gangs and vigilantism. Religious revivals worried him for the same reason. They inflamed emotions and ran roughshod over good order.**

**For rousing passions, church politics were worst of all, and his departure from his childhood faith occurred when John was just ten. The parish that year called a new minister who was insufficiently orthodox for many in the congregation. The heresy trial was held in the Adam’s family living room, demonstrating for young John “a spirit of dogmatism and bigotry” that left him disillusioned with the old time religion.**

**More to his liking were his studies in science, opening up new vistas on the heavens and raising theological questions as well. “Astronomers tell us with good reason, that not only all the planets and satellites in our solar system, but all the unnumbered worlds … are inhabited,” Adams mused while a student at Harvard. Belief in extraterrestrials was in vogue at the time, and like many enlightened thinkers, Adams was convinced that earthlings are not alone. With so many intelligent beings scattered across space, did it make sense to believe that “God Almighty must have assumed the respective shapes of all these different species” in the form of a savior, or that “all these beings must be consigned to everlasting perdition?” The supposition was hard to swallow.**

**Nor would a deity of such cosmic scale indulge in petty human emotions of petulance or retribution. Would a Creator whose “presence is as extensive as space” create the human race only to consign nine-tenths of them to eternal fire? “I believe no such thing,” Adams declared.**

**My adoration of the Author of the Universe is too profound and too sincere. The love of God and his creation—delight, joy, triumph, exaltation in my own existence—though but an atom, a molecule *organique* in the universe—are my religion.**

**Yet Adams maintained that he was a genuine Christian, again all who questioned it. He admitted that other traditions might also contain a saving truth, and looked forward to “translations into English … of the sacred books of the Persians, the Chinese, the Hindoos. Then our grandchildren … may compare notes and hold fast to all that is good.” But while Christianity might be supplemented by other faiths, he had little expectation that it would ever be supplanted or surpassed.**

**What is important to understand is that Christianity for Adams centered not in creeds or dogmas or in the literal truth of the Bible, but rather in the ethical teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. “The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my religion,” he proclaimed. Unfortunately, the church had wandered far from the simple parables of its founder. “How has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed,” he asked. “The design of Christianity was not to make men good riddle-solvers or good mystery-mongers,” he complained, “but good men, good magistrates and good subjects, good husbands and good wives, good parents and good children.” Clearly, Adams felt that many Christian sects had failed in this task—including the Puritan lineage of his youth.**

**Later in life, he mellowed somewhat toward his childhood faith. “I must be a very unnatural son to entertain any prejudices against the Calvinists,” he told a friend, “for my father and mother, my uncles and aunts, and all my predecessors, from our common ancestor, who landed in the country two hundred years ago were of that persuasion.” From his spiritual forbearers, John Adams inherited a high moral seriousness and strict code of personal conduct, along with the work ethic for which the Puritans were famous. He inherited also a rather gloomy disposition—he was prone to despondency—and a view of the human situation that looked on life as nothing more than “a vapor, a fog, a dew, a cloud, a blossom.” But like the Puritans, who knew that the flower fadeth, he could still sing praises to the Maker of it all.**

**My religion is founded on the love of God and my neighbor (he wrote as the age of eighty), on the hope of pardon for my offences, upon contrition, upon the duty as well as the necessity of supporting with patience the inevitable evils of life; in the duty of doing no wrong, but all the good I can, to the creation, of which I am but an infinitesimal part.**

**He’d come a long way from his Sunday School days.**

**Yet however far Adams ventured, spiritually, he always came back to Braintree and the meetinghouse where his family had worshiped for generations. Walking the farm he named Peacefield, riding horseback and surveying the familiar Blue Hills of his youth and playing with his own grandchildren brought comfort to his later years.**

**His presidency had been wracked by dissension. Rejected at the polls after a single term in office, he lamented that “if I were to go over my life again, I would be a shoemaker rather than an American statesman.” But there was something healing in the changing seasons and never ending round of chores that went with rural life. As a boy, he had wanted only to muck about the fields. Finally, his wish was fulfilled. He had “exchanged honor and virtue for manure,” he joked. But the landscape reminded him of life’s continuities—and so did the persistence of faith. “What has preserved this race of Adamses in all their ramifications, in such numbers, health, peace, comfort and mediocrity?” he asked rhetorically. Except for the bulwark of religion, they might all have been “rakes, fops, sota, gamblers, starved with hunger, frozen with cold … melted away and disappeared.”**

**Adams paid tribute to that heritage in the words he inscribed on the lid of the sarcophagus of his great-great-grandfather Henry—the first of the Adams line to emigrate from England and settle in Massachusetts in 1640.**

**This stone and several others have been placed in this yard by a great, great, grandson from a veneration of the piety, humility, simplicity, prudence, frugality, industry and perseverance of his ancestors in hopes of recommending an affirmation of their virtues to their posterity.**

**In retrospect, he had many reasons to be grateful. Though fate had handed him “a pretty large dose” of distress and pain, still he had enjoyed “more pleasure than pain ten to one, nay, if you please, an hundred to one.” In Abigail, he’d found his lifelong soul mate and intellectual companion. His son had followed in his footsteps to the highest office in the land. He was conscious that he had lived in historic times and had a hand in shaping events with worldwide repercussions.**

**As his thoughts turned toward futurity, he wrote, “I am not tormented with the fear of death; nor though suffering under many infirmities and agitated by many afflictions, weary of life … we shall leave the world with many consolations; it is better than we found it—superstition, persecution and bigotry are somewhat abated … Our country has brilliant and exhilarating prospects before it.”**

**Yet he composed no epitaph for himself, no lengthy litany of his own attainments. Chalk it up to Yankee reserve, or to the genuine modesty that was the flip side of his own enormous ego, but at the end of his life, he left behind only a few words of homage to the past and a wish that the future might live up to the promise of those sturdy New England pioneers from whom he traced his own descent. It was the perfect monument, carved from native rock—as solid, durable and understated as the man who put it there.**