

Thursday, June 30 and Sunday, July 3

Christian Independence

The First Letter of Peter 2: 11 - 17

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1 Peter 2:11-17

¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. ¹³For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.

¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

When the founding father of the United States, John Adams, was on his deathbed, it was July 4, 1826. John Adams last words were "Thomas Jefferson still survives." But Adams was mistaken, as Thomas Jefferson had died five hours earlier, also on July 4th.¹

These two men, both signers of the Declaration of Independence, had such independent personalities that they were friends, and then enemies, and then friends again.

Adams was 90 years old when he died, Jefferson was 82. They exchanged many letters in the last years of their lives, which included some of their thoughts on religion.

Did I mention their independent personalities? John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson that "this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it."²

Why would a founding father write such a thing? Did I mention their independent personalities? Jefferson was so independent that he made his own version of the Bible, taking out everything *he* thought was not directly said or done by Jesus of Nazareth. John Adams' father was a Congregationalist deacon, and his father-in-law was a Congregationalist minister, but John Adams became a Unitarian, rejecting several basic doctrines of traditional Christianity.

Adams and Jefferson both seemed to live as if being a truly independent person meant being independent from traditional religion. So where does this leave Christian citizens

¹ <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/thomas-jefferson-and-john-adams-die>

² http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_May_5_1817

of the United States *today*? How do we respond to verses of scripture such as the first letter of Peter, which we have shared this morning?

The first letter of Peter leaves quite a lot of questions for a modern Christian American. First Peter chapter two verse thirteen reads, ¹³*For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme or of governors* and verse seventeen says to *Honor the emperor*. No wonder John Adams and Thomas Jefferson got rebellious about religion. And yet, Adams and Jefferson and First Peter agree on a key point, which was that of connectedness of people for ethical conduct.

In other words, Adams and Jefferson, and Peter and you and me – we are *all* of course individuals and blessed by God with freedom – but we are ALSO connected to one another in so many ways that we *must* be ethical for everyone to be free and blessed.

So what about these references in first Peter to the emperor? The first letter of Peter was sent to Christians living in Rome, and those Christians were not respected in society in general. The idea of first Peter is that if Christians behave in an exemplary manner, it will reflect well not only on *individual* Christians, but on Christianity as a whole.

For more than half of the history of Christianity, Christians lived in and among people of different religions. The diversity of faiths that we are becoming familiar with in our *modern* world is actually more similar to what life was like for the original Christians.

The lifestyle of being Christian and being surrounded by Christians that our grandparents and great grandparents – and that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson knew – *that* lifestyle is actually *rare* in the whole history of Christianity.

One of the things that Christians today struggle with most is the relationship between Christianity and Islam. For many people, the two religions seem incompatible – many people feel that there is no possibility for peace between the two.

The first letter of Peter is was a letter of encouragement and guidance for Christians who lived in a place with a state religion that was not Christianity. At the time of Peter's letter, the Roman Empire was not only the *government* that ruled people's lives, it was also the Roman *religion* that ruled peoples' lives. They were one in the same. There was no separation of church and state.

Today, many Americans wonder out loud what it means for Muslims to live in the United States, because Islam is viewed as Rome was, in that both governed people's lives religiously *and* nationally. Ironically, many Americans claim the United States as a "Christian" nation, in spite of there being no state religion of the United States.

My ordination to the ministry 15 years ago this August placed it just a month and a few days prior to September 11th. I have never had the luxury of being a minister in a world without strained relations between Christianity and Islam.

But is that as it should be? People of Christian backgrounds such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams envisioned a world in which people would stop fighting over religion. Jefferson and Adams envisioned a world in which letters like Peter's would not need to be written, because everyone would be free to worship as they choose.

It was during George Washington's presidency that the United States negotiated its first treaty with Muslim nations. John Adams had become president after Washington, and so was the one to sign what was called the Treaty of Tripoli in 1797.

Tripoli was a collective word for territories of Algeria, Morocco, and surrounding areas. These countries were often collectively called "Muhammadan" nations, which referred to the prophet Muhammed, who recited the holy book of Islam, the Quran.

The treaty with Tripoli stated that: *As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion - as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen,[Muslims] - and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan [Mohammadan] nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising[sic] from religious opinions shall ever...[interrupt]...the harmony existing between the two countries³.*

In other words, because the United States separated church and state, there was no reason why a country full of mosques would be any more an enemy of the United States than any other nation. The Treaty of Tripoli was called a treaty of "peace and friendship."

"Peace and friendship" appeared to be the goal of the first letter of Peter. The Christians who received the letter in Rome were encouraged to both "fear God" and "honor the emperor," because the author of the letter knew that the only alternative would be extinction for his fellow Christians.

So, does survival merit religious compromise? Do we actually remain more free if we conform to society while holding on to our religious convictions?

Peter's first letter did not provide easy answers, and we do not have easy answers today. The dialogue between Muslims and Christians is made difficult because many Christians view Islam as incompatible with a separation of church and state.

What we forget is that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were total radicals in their perspectives that state and religion could be separate. For most of human history, the

³ Charles I. Bevans, ed. *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America 1776-1949*. Vol. 11: Philippines-United Arab Republic. Washington D.C.: Department of State Publications, 1974, p. 1072).

Accessed at http://www.adherents.com/people/pa/John_Adams.html June 2016

power of a king, a queen, a sultan, an emperor, or a governor was believed to be lodged *with those rulers by the power of God.*

To this day, many European countries still have a state church, while those countries identify as being democracies.

Both Jefferson and Adams fought hard for the separation of church and state. At the same time, Jefferson's careful attention to the Bible – even if it was to edit most of it – that attention to scripture shined a light on a man who took faith seriously.

As for John Adams, in that same letter to Thomas Jefferson, in which he wrote that “this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it,” he continued on to say:

But in this exclamati[on] I should have been... fanatical....Without Religion this World would be Something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company, I mean Hell....The most abandoned Scoundrel that ever existed, never Yet Wholly extinguished his Conscience, and while Conscience remains there is some Religion. . . .⁴

For people of faith, being a free person and a religious person has never been viewed as being incompatible by religions – being a child of God is meant to be the most freeing human experience possible.

People limit other people's freedoms, not God. God loves unconditionally. God does not need treaties of peace and friendship because God is the essence of peace and friendship.

An independent Christian is a connected Christian – connected to God, connected to Christ, connected by the Holy Spirit with fellow Christians. An independent Christian is also very free – free to find peace and friendship with *all* God's children, no matter what religion or nation another person is from.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/livingrev/religion/text3/adamsjeffersoncor.pdf>