

Thank Adams and Jefferson for 230 Years Without Religious Conflict

by Nick Gier

The last surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, died on July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after the birth of our nation.

Politics divided them in their early years--Jefferson beat the incumbent Adams in the hard fought election of 1800--but liberal religion and the rejection of Christian dogma united them as they grew older.

Adams always boasted that he would outlive Jefferson. Adams' very last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives," but he did not realize that his great friend had died hours earlier at Monticello. It is said that messengers from each home passed each other on their way to deliver the sad news.

As a young man, Adams became disillusioned with his strict Calvinist upbringing, and he had this to say about church services: "Sundays are sacrificed 'to the frigid performances' of disciples of 'frigid John Calvin.' "

As religious liberals, Jefferson and Adams believed that true religion was one founded on morality, not religious dogma. Neither of them believed in the Trinity nor the divinity of Christ, claiming that these doctrines were not essential to the practice of Christianity. Besides, early Americans had fresh memories of the destruction caused by European rulers denying religious freedom to their subjects.

Adams would have agreed with Jefferson when he wrote that "the Christian religion, when . . . brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent instructor, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expansion of the human mind."

Adams believed that anyone practicing Christian morality should be called a Christian, even though that person did not subscribe to the entire Christian creed. In a letter to Jefferson in 1813, he put it very simply: "Yet I believe all the honest men among you are Christians, in my sense of the word."

Jefferson shared Adams' strong dislike for Calvinism. In a letter to him in 1823, Jefferson rejects Calvin's doctrines of predestination and human depravity. His critique concludes with this blast: "It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all, than to blaspheme him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin."

Jefferson believed in the separation of church and state so strongly that he and Andrew Jackson were the only presidents who declined to make the traditional presidential proclamation for Thanksgiving Day. Jefferson argued that the state should not officiate in anything religious, including a day of thanksgiving and prayer.

On June 10, 1797, President Adams signed the Treaty of Tripoli, Article 11 of which began: "As the Government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion. . . ." Outgoing President George Washington had sent this treaty to the Senate without objection, and, with no recorded debate, the Senate ratified it on June 7, 1797.

As we celebrate our 230th year as free republic founded on liberal religious principles, we should remember that no American has ever been imprisoned or executed for his or her religious beliefs. Even though neo-Confederates make the absurd claim that the Civil War was theological war caused by liberal Christians, America has never had an internal religious conflict. We should thank Adams, Jefferson, and all our founding thinkers for their wisdom in avoiding the caustic mixture of religion and politics.