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'A Wall of Separation'

FBI Helps Restore Jefferson's Obliterated Draft

By JAMES HUTSON

Following is an article by the curator of a major exhibition at the Library that opens this month and runs through Aug. 22. A key document on view in "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic" (see LC Information Bulletin, May 1998), is the letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptists, which contains the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state." With the help of the FBI, the draft of the letter, including Jefferson's obliterated words, are now known.



Thomas Jefferson's reply on Jan. 1, 1802, to an address from the Danbury (Conn.) Baptist Association, congratulating him upon his election as president, contains a phrase that is as familiar in today's political and judicial circles as the lyrics of a hit tune: "a wall of separation between church and state." This phrase has become well known because it is considered to explain (many would say, distort) the "religion clause" of the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...," a clause whose meaning has been the subject of passionate dispute for the past 50 years.

During his lifetime, Jefferson could not have predicted that the language in his Danbury Baptist letter would have endured as long as some of his other arresting phrases. The letter was published in a Massachusetts newspaper a month after Jefferson wrote it and then was more or less forgotten for half a century. It was put back into circulation in an edition of Jefferson's writings, published in 1853, and reprinted in 1868 and 1871.

The Supreme Court turned the spotlight on the "wall of separation" phrase in 1878 by declaring in *Reynolds v. United States* "that it may be accepted almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect of the [first] amendment."

The high court took the same position in widely publicized decisions in 1947 and 1948, asserting in the latter case, *McCullum v. Board of Education*, that, "in the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between church and state.'" Since *McCullum* forbade religious instruction in public schools, it appeared that the court had used Jefferson's "wall" metaphor as a sword to sever religion from public life, a result that was and still is intolerable to many Americans.

Some Supreme Court justices did not like what their colleagues had done. In 1962, Justice Potter Stewart complained that jurisprudence was not "aided by the uncritical invocation of metaphors like the 'wall of separation,' a phrase nowhere to be found in the Constitution." Addressing the issue in 1985, Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist lamented that "unfortunately the Establishment Clause has been expressly freighted with Jefferson's misleading metaphor for nearly 40 years." Defenders of the metaphor responded immediately: "despite its detractors and despite its leaks, cracks and its archways, the wall ranks as one of the mightiest monuments of constitutional government in this nation."

Given the gravity of the issues involved in the debate over the wall metaphor, it is surprising that so little effort has been made to go behind the printed text of the Danbury Baptist letter to unlock its secrets. Jefferson's handwritten draft of the letter is held by the Library's Manuscript Division. Inspection reveals that nearly 30 percent of the draft -- seven of 25 lines -- was deleted by the president prior to publication. Jefferson indicated his deletions by circling several lines and noting in the left margin that they were to be excised. He inked out several words in the circled section and a few words elsewhere in the draft. He also inked out three entire lines following the circled section. [Click here to see the text of the final letter.](#)

Since the Library plans to display Jefferson's handwritten draft of the Danbury Baptist letter in its

forthcoming exhibition "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic," the question was raised whether modern computer technology could be used to uncover Jefferson's inked-out words, so that the unedited copy of the letter might be shown to viewers alongside Jefferson's corrected draft. The Library requested the assistance of FBI Director Louis Freeh, who generously permitted the FBI Laboratory to apply its state-of-the-art technology to the task of restoring Jefferson's obliterated words. The FBI was successful, with the result that the entire draft of the Danbury Baptist letter is now legible (below). This fully legible copy will be seen in the exhibition in the company of its handwritten, edited companion draft. [Click here to see Jefferson's unedited text](#). By examining both documents, viewers will be able to discern Jefferson's true intentions in writing the celebrated Danbury Baptist letter.

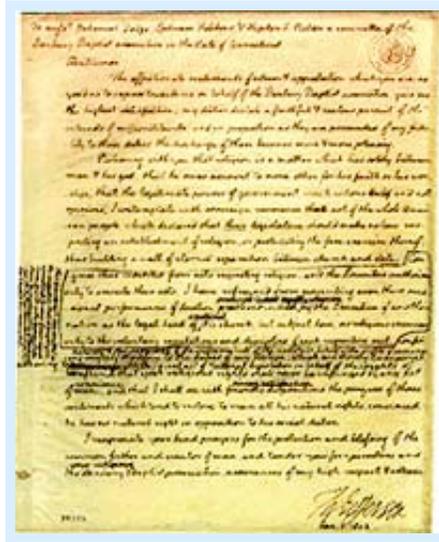
The edited draft of the letter reveals that, far from being dashed off as a "short note of courtesy," as some have called it, Jefferson labored over its composition. For reasons unknown, the address of the Danbury Baptists, dated Oct. 7, 1801, did not reach Jefferson until Dec. 30, 1801. Jefferson drafted his response forthwith and submitted it to the two New England Republican politicians in his Cabinet, Postmaster General Gideon Granger of Connecticut and Attorney General Levi Lincoln of Massachusetts. Granger responded to Jefferson on Dec. 31.

The next day, New Year's Day, was a busy one for the president, who received and entertained various groups of well-wishers, but so eager was he to complete his answer to the Danbury Baptists that, amid the hubbub, he sent his draft to Lincoln with a cover note explaining his reasons for writing it. Lincoln responded immediately; just as quickly, Jefferson edited the draft to conform to Lincoln's suggestions, signed the letter and released it, all on New Year's Day, 1802.

That Jefferson consulted two New England politicians about his messages indicated that he regarded his reply to the Danbury Baptists as a political letter, not as a dispassionate theoretical pronouncement on the relations between government and religion. His letter, he told Lincoln in his New Year's Day note, was meant to gratify public opinion in Republican strongholds like Virginia, "being seasoned to the Southern taste only."

Expressing his views in a reply to a public address also indicated that Jefferson saw himself operating in a political mode, for by 1802 Americans had come to consider replies to addresses, first exploited as political pep talks by John Adams in 1798, as the prime vehicles for the dissemination of partisan views. A few weeks earlier, on Nov. 20, 1801, Jefferson had, in fact, used a reply to an address from the Vermont legislature to signal his intention to redeem a campaign promise by proposing a tax reduction at the beginning of the new session of Congress in December.

In his New Year's note to Lincoln, Jefferson revealed that he hoped to accomplish two things by replying to the Danbury Baptists. One was to issue a "condemnation of the alliance between church and state." This he accomplished in the first, printed, part of the draft. Jefferson's strictures on church-state entanglement were little more than rewarmed phrases and ideas from his *Statute Establishing Religious Freedom* (1786) and from other, similar statements. To needle his political opponents, Jefferson paraphrased a passage, that "the legitimate powers of government extend to ... acts only" and not to opinions, from the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which the Federalists had shamelessly distorted in the election of 1800 in an effort to stigmatize him as an atheist. So politicized had church-state issues become by 1802 that Jefferson told Lincoln that he considered the articulation of his views on the subject, in messages like the Danbury Baptist letter, as ways to fix his supporters' "political tenets."



The page, before and after restoration.

Airing the Republican position on church-state relations was not, however, Jefferson's principal reason for writing the Danbury Baptist letter. He was looking, he told Lincoln, for an opportunity for "saying why I do not proclaim fastings & thanksgivings, as my predecessors did" and latched onto the Danbury address as the best way to broadcast his views on the subject. Although using the Danbury address was "awkward" -- it did not mention fasts and thanksgivings -- Jefferson pressed it into service to counter what he saw as an emerging Federalist plan to exploit the thanksgiving day issue to smear him, once again, as an infidel.

Jefferson's hand was forced by the arrival in the United States in the last week of November 1801 of what the nation's newspapers called the "momentous news" of the conclusion between Britain and France of the Treaty of Amiens, which relieved the young American republic of the danger that had threatened it for years of being drawn into a devastating European war. Washington had proclaimed a national thanksgiving in 1796 to commemorate a much more ambiguous foreign policy achievement, the ratification of Jay's Treaty that attempted to adjust outstanding differences with Great Britain. Would Jefferson, the Federalists archly asked, not imitate the example of his illustrious predecessor and bid the nation to thank God for its delivery from danger by the Treaty of Amiens? The voice of New England Federalism, the Boston *Columbian Centinel*, cynically challenged Jefferson to act. "It is highly probable," said the Centinel on Nov. 28, 1801, "that on the receipt of the news of Peace in Europe, the President will issue a Proclamation recommending a General Thanksgiving. The measure, it is hoped, will not be denounced by the democrats as unconstitutional, as previous Proclamations have been."

The *Centinel* and its Federalist readers knew that Jefferson would never issue a Thanksgiving proclamation, for to him and the Republican faithful in the middle and southern states, presidential thanksgivings and fasts were anathema, an egregious example of the Federalists' political exploitation of religion. Federalist preachers had routinely used fast and thanksgiving days to revile Jefferson and his followers, going so far in 1799 as to suggest that a Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic was a divine punishment for Republican godlessness.

During the Adams administration, Republicans organized street demonstrations against presidential fast days, ridiculed them in the newspapers and boycotted them. Since Federalists knew that Jefferson would never proclaim a national thanksgiving to praise God for the Treaty of Amiens, they calculated that they could use his dereliction as evidence of his continuing contempt for Christianity, which had spilled out again, in their view, in his invitation to "Citizen" Thomas Paine to return from France to the United States.

To offer the nation's hospitality to Paine, author of *The Age of Reason*, the "atheist's bible" to the faithful, was, the *Washington Federalist* charged on Dec. 8, 1801, an "open and daring insult offered to the Christian religion." Here, for the Federalists, was the same old Jefferson, the same old atheist. Political capital, they concluded, could still be made from sounding the alarm about presidential infidelity.

During the presidential campaign of 1800, Jefferson had suffered in silence the relentless and deeply offensive Federalist charges that he was an atheist. Now he decided to strike back, using the most

serviceable weapon at hand, the address of the Danbury Baptists.

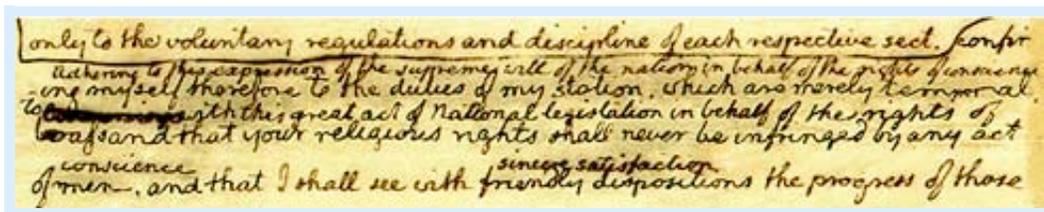
Jefferson's counterattack is contained in the circled section of his draft and in the inked-out lines. He declared that he had "refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion," i.e., thanksgivings and fasts, because they were "religious exercises." This was conventional Republican doctrine that could be found in any number of party newspapers. On March 27, 1799, for example, an "old Ecclesiastic" declared in the Philadelphia *Aurora* that "Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer are religious acts belonging to the kingdom of Christ" over which the civil magistrate, in the American system, had no authority.

Jefferson took the gloves off when he asserted that the proclamations of thanksgivings and fasts were "practiced indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church," i.e., by George III, King of England. By identifying the proclamation of thanksgivings and fasts as "British," Jefferson damned them, for in the Republican lexicon British was a dirty word, a synonym for "Anglomane," "Monocrat," "Tory," terms with which the Republicans had demonized the Federalists for a decade for their alleged plans to reverse the Revolution by reimposing a British-style monarchy on the United States. One of the most obnoxious features of the Federalists' American monarchy, as the Republicans depicted their putative project, was a church established by law, and Jefferson doubtless expected those who read his message to understand that, by supporting "British" fasts and thanksgivings, the Federalists were scheming, as always, to open a door to the introduction of an ecclesiastical tyranny.

In indicting the Federalists for their "Tory" taste for thanksgivings and fasts, Jefferson was playing rough. Thanksgivings and fasts had regularly been celebrated in parts of the country since the first settlements: to sully them with Anglophobic mudslinging, generated by the partisan warfare of his own time, as Jefferson did, was a low blow. But who was being more unfair: Jefferson or his Federalist inquisitors, who continued to calumniate him as an atheist?

The unedited draft of the Danbury Baptist letter makes it clear why Jefferson drafted it: He wanted his political partisans to know that he opposed proclaiming fasts and thanksgivings, not because he was irreligious, but because he refused to continue a British practice that was an offense to republicanism. To emphasize his resolve in this matter, Jefferson inserted two phrases with a clenched-teeth, defiant ring: "wall of eternal separation between church and state" and "the duties of my station, which are merely temporal." These last words -- "merely temporal" -- revealed Jefferson's preoccupation with British practice. Temporal, a strong word meaning secular, was a British appellation for the lay members of the House of Lords, the Lords Temporal, as opposed to the ecclesiastical members, the Lords Spiritual. "Eternal separation" and "merely temporal" -- here was language as plain as Jefferson could make it to assure the Republican faithful that their "religious rights shall never be infringed by any act of mine."

Jefferson knew and seemed to savor the fact that his letter, as originally drafted, would give "great offense" to the New England Federalists. Reviewing the draft on Dec. 31, Postmaster General Granger, the object of unremitting political harassment in Connecticut, cheered Jefferson on, apparently welcoming the "temporary spasms" that he predicted the letter would produce "among the Established Religionists" in his home state. When Levi Lincoln, a cooler head, saw the letter the next day, he immediately perceived that, as written, it could hurt Jefferson politically among the growing number of Republicans in New England. People there, Lincoln warned Jefferson, "have always been in the habit of observing fasts and thanksgivings in performance of proclamations from their respective Executives." To disparage this custom with an "implied censure" by representing it as a tainted, Tory ceremony could be politically disastrous, however well the slur might play south of the Hudson River.



Before and after: Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists contained the famous phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" (in the sentence just before the area circled for deletion). The text as recovered by the FBI Laboratory shows that Jefferson first wrote "a wall of eternal separation." In the deleted section Jefferson explained why he refused to proclaim national days of fasting and thanksgiving, as his predecessors, Adams and Washington, had done. In the left margin, next to the deleted section, Jefferson noted that he excised the section to avoid offending "our republican friends in the eastern states" who cherished days of fasting and thanksgiving. [Click here to see the unedited text of the letter.](#)

Jefferson heeded Lincoln's advice, with the result that he deleted the entire section about thanksgivings and fasts in the Danbury draft, noting in the left margin that the "paragraph was omitted on the suggestion that it might give uneasiness to some of our republican friends in the eastern states where the proclamation of thanksgivings etc. by their Executives is an antient habit & is respected." Removed in the process of revision was the designation of the president's duties as "merely temporal"; "eternal" was dropped as a modifier of "wall." Jefferson apparently made these changes because he thought the original phrases would sound too antireligious to pious New England ears.

In gutting his draft was Jefferson playing the hypocrite, sacrificing his principles to political expediency, as his Federalist opponents never tired of charging? By no means, for the Danbury Baptist letter was never conceived by Jefferson to be a statement of fundamental principles; it was meant to be a political manifesto, nothing more.

Withholding from the public the rationale for his policy on thanksgivings and fasts did not solve Jefferson's problem, for his refusal to proclaim them would not escape the attention of the Federalists and would create a continuing vulnerability to accusations of irreligion. Jefferson found a solution to this problem even as he wrestled with the wording of the Danbury Baptist letter, a solution in the person of the famous Baptist preacher John Leland, who appeared at the White House on Jan. 1, 1802, to give the president a mammoth, 1,235-pound cheese, produced by Leland's parishioners in Cheshire, Mass.

One of the nation's best known advocates of religious liberty, Leland had accepted an invitation to preach in the House of Representatives on Sunday, Jan. 3, and Jefferson evidently concluded that, if Leland found nothing objectionable about officiating at worship on public property, he could not be criticized for attending a service at which his friend was preaching. Consequently, "contrary to all former practice," Jefferson appeared at church services in the House on Sunday, Jan. 3, two days after recommending in his reply to the Danbury Baptists "a wall of separation between church and state"; during the remainder of his two administrations he attended these services "constantly."

Jefferson's participation in House church services and his granting of permission to various denominations to worship in executive office buildings, where four-hour communion services were held, cannot be discussed here; these activities are fully illustrated in the forthcoming exhibition. What can be said is that going to church solved Jefferson's public relations problems, for he correctly anticipated that his participation in public worship would be reported in newspapers throughout the country. A Philadelphia newspaper, for example, informed its readers on Jan. 23, 1802, that "Mr. Jefferson has been seen at church, and has assisted in singing the hundredth psalm." In presenting Jefferson to the nation as a churchgoer, this publicity offset whatever negative impressions might be created by his refusal to proclaim thanksgiving and fasts and prevented the erosion of his political base in God-fearing areas like New England.

Jefferson's public support for religion appears, however, to have been more than a cynical political gesture. Scholars have recently argued that in the 1790s Jefferson developed a more favorable view of Christianity that led him to endorse the position of his fellow Founders that religion was necessary for the welfare of a republican government, that it was, as Washington proclaimed in his Farewell Address, indispensable for the happiness and prosperity of the people. Jefferson had, in fact, said as much in his First Inaugural Address. His attendance at church services in the House was, then, his way of offering symbolic support for religious faith and for its beneficent role in republican government.

It seems likely that in modifying the draft of the Danbury Baptist letter by eliminating words like "eternal" and "merely temporal," which sounded so uncompromisingly secular, Jefferson was motivated not merely by political considerations but by a realization that these words, written in haste to make a political statement, did not accurately reflect the conviction he had reached by the beginning of 1802 on the role of government in religion. Jefferson would never compromise his views that there were things government could not do in the religious sphere -- legally establish one creed as official truth and support it with its full financial and coercive powers. But by 1802, he seems to have come around to something close to the views of New England Baptist leaders such as Isaac Backus and Caleb Blood, who believed that, provided the state kept within its well-appointed limits, it could provide "friendly aids" to the churches, including putting at their disposal public property that even a stickler like John Leland was comfortable using.

Analyzed with the help of the latest technology, the Danbury Baptist letter has yielded significant new information. Using it to fix the intent of constitutional documents is limited, however, by well established rules of statutory construction: the meaning of a document cannot be determined by what a drafter deleted or by what he did concurrently with the drafting of a document. But it will be of considerable interest in

assessing the credibility of the Danbury Baptist letter as a tool of constitutional interpretation to know, as we now do, that it was written as a partisan counterpunch, aimed by Jefferson below the belt at enemies who were tormenting him more than a decade after the First Amendment was composed.

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An American Pioneer in the Study of Religion: Hannah Adams (1755-1831) and Her "Dictionary of All Religions"

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An American Pioneer in the Study of Religion

Hannah Adams (1755-1831) and her *Dictionary of All Religions*

Thomas A. Tweed

ALMOST A CENTURY before the rise of comparative religion as a field, Hannah Adams resolved to write an impartial and comprehensive survey of the religions of the world. The significance of that book, *A Dictionary of All Religions*, was not lost on her contemporaries. Adams was well known in New England during her lifetime. She was, as one historian has suggested, one of the most widely read authors in the region between 1787 and 1830 (Gilmore:65). Her works were shelved in family libraries as frequently as those of, for example, Jonathan Edwards. By certain measures, they were even more popular than the writings of John Bunyan or Benjamin Franklin. There is other evidence of her regional popularity: a reviewer of the fourth edition assumed that his readers knew the author and her works. The Reverent Samuel Willard (1775-1859) of Deerfield, Massachusetts, opened his very positive evaluation by reporting that he would not offer much background since “the author of this work is in such full possession of publick regard, from the benefit conferred by her writings, and the merits of her several productions are so generally known” (86).¹

Her fame was less widespread elsewhere, but she had readers and

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¹In this opening paragraph, and throughout this essay, I refer to Adams's attempt to offer an “impartial” account of religions. Some scholars in the humanities and social sciences have questioned whether researchers can achieve “objectivity.” I cannot address this important and vexing issue here, but clearly complete impartiality is impossible. It is difficult even to imagine what that might mean. At the same time, I presuppose that scholars should aim to treat sources fairly and critically and should attempt to be conscious of commitments, religious or otherwise, that might limit understanding. Whichever other principles might be involved in the academic study of reli-

admirers scattered throughout the United States and Great Britain. Her *Dictionary of all Religions* was first published in 1784 under a different title. By the time the fourth and final edition appeared in 1817, the popular book had changed its title twice and appeared in three American editions and two British versions. An anonymous reviewer of her posthumously published *Memoirs* claimed that “her reputation had extended through her own land, and was well known abroad” (“Review”:133). Adams’s surviving correspondence offers some support for this claim. Martha Ramsay of Charleston wrote a letter praising the second edition of Adams’s *Dictionary*: “I think your work far exceeds anything of the kind yet attempted, and one which no person or inquiring mind, having once perused would willingly be without.”

Unfortunately, most “inquiring minds” of succeeding generations either never have perused her book or willingly have done without it. Most twentieth-century histories of the field fail to cite her writings (Jastrow; DeVries; Bolle; Sharpe). Her work had some influence on nineteenth-century attempts to survey the religious landscape. For example, it provided the model for Vincent L. Milner’s *Religious Denominations of the World*, published in 1872. Milner’s volume reprinted material from Adams’s book, and it was remarkably similar in structure and approach. But the majority of late-nineteenth-century American interpreters of religion overlooked or undervalued her contributions. In one sense, this is not surprising. Her sources quickly became outdated because of the proliferation of new translations and authoritative accounts during the nineteenth century. It also makes sense that the conservative Protestant authors of the many compendia that appeared in the century ignored her work: they did not share her commitment to impartiality. It is more difficult to explain, however, her loss of stature among New England liberals. Unitarian and Transcendentalist writers in the Boston area—including Lydia Maria Child (1802-80), James Freeman Clarke (1810-88), and Samuel Johnson (1822-82)—authored important works on the world religions starting in the 1850s. These works were the successors to the compendia of Adams’s generation, and they anticipated the even more sophisticated surveys that began to appear in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. Yet Clarke, Johnson, and Child failed to acknowledge publicly Adams’s important contributions.

In one of the most surprising and inexplicable developments, Child,

gion, these two are fundamental. In this sense, Adams is laudable for aiming at “impartiality.” In this sense, she is part of the lineage of the study of religion.

who met Adams and read her work, claimed originality for her own call for an impartial approach to the study of religions. In the preface to the first volume of *The Progress of Religious Ideas*, Child complained about the “one-sidedness” of previous overviews. Her book, Child promised her readers, would be novel: “The facts it contains are very old; the novelty it claims is the point of view from which those facts are seen and presented” (1855:1,vii). Her approach would be new, Child explained, because she had written “with complete impartiality.” No one else had done that: “I am not aware of any one who truly revered the spirit of Christianity, who has ever before tried the experiment of placing it precisely on a level with other religions, so far as the manner of representation is concerned” (1855:1:viii,ix,x). It is difficult to know what Child meant by this. Did she mean that Adams had not succeeded in her attempts at impartiality? Did she think that Adams had not even attempted impartiality? Or did she—this is difficult to imagine—simply forget Adams’s book?

In any case, like Child, many independent and academic scholars who followed Adams have failed to acknowledge Adams’s precedent; and many of those who have remembered her have dismissed her contributions as insignificant. Perhaps taking the lead from Adams’s own self-deprecating comments, the author of one entry in a biographical dictionary concluded that “her works contain nothing original” (DAB). In a collection of essays on New England religious history published in 1917, Dean William Wallace Fenn of Harvard Divinity School seemed to go out of his way to dismiss her, calling her “a literary lady of very local and temporary renown” (Planter:104). A more recent evaluation, which appeared in a highly respected reference work, suggested that, although she was admired by her contemporaries, “her writings are of no lasting consequence” (James).

But some have remembered her and acknowledged her contributions. Students of women’s history have remembered Hannah Adams as the first woman to earn her living by writing in America (Cott 1977:7). The only two articles devoted exclusively to Adams both emphasize this (Gould; Gleason), and so do most of the entries in biographical dictionaries (NCAB; DAB; Levernier and Wilmes). She also is mentioned in many overviews of American women’s history, usually at or near the start of a chapter on women authors or professionals (Hanaford:175-76; Logan:793-94; Irwin:21-22). Some scholars have recognized her role as an early history writer (Brooks:125; Baym:1). Students of New England religious history recall her disputes with Jedidiah Morse and her acquaintances with major Unitarian ministers (Wright:77-85; Phil-

lips:151-57). Several chroniclers of the history of the American encounter with Asian religions have noted Adams's significance (Ahlstrom:21; Jackson:16-19; Tweed:xvii,4,93; Williams:61-66).

A few scholars have recognized her preeminent place in the history of the study of religion. The author of one of the earliest histories of the field of "comparative religion," Louis Henry Jordon, listed five Americans who wrote during the second half of the nineteenth century among its "founders and masters"—James Freeman Clarke, Samuel Johnson, William Fairfield Warren, Crawford Howell Toy, and Frank Field Ellinwood. Adams, however, was the only American included—with Benjamin Constant, Christoph Meiners, Friedrich Max Müller, and others—among the field's "prophets and pioneers." In that 1905 volume Jordon acknowledged that Adams had failed to implement fully her plan for impartiality, but he argued that her work was a "really notable undertaking" considering her period and limitations. It pointed toward the new field of comparative religion that would get under way during the 1870s (146-50).

To suggest that Adams was a pioneer is not to say that she stood alone. Her *Dictionary* was linked with two related European literary genres—philosophical "dictionaries" and religious compendia. If Adams's perspective was more conventionally Christian than that of either Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) or Voltaire (1694-1778), the format of her book owed much to these and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical dictionaries. The other, more important, tradition that Adams's book continued was that of compendia of religions. These began to appear at least as early as the seventeenth century. One of the first was Alexander Ross's *Pantheia; Or, a View of All Religions in the World*. But like most of the overviews that followed, Ross's book was hardly as comprehensive as its title suggested, and its prominent Christian author, who served as the King's chaplain in his later years, showed little inclination to treat non-Christian traditions with any sympathy. Other notable British and Continental works in this tradition included Thomas Broughton's *Historical Dictionary of All Religions*, Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, Charles François Dupuis's *Origine de tous les cultes*, Christoph Meiners's *Allgemeine kritische geschichte der religionen*, and Benjamin Constant's *De la religion, considérée dans sa source, ses formes, et ses développements*. Adams was not as theoretically sophisticated as most of these authors, and she failed to include a general entry on "religion" or to speculate explicitly about its nature or origin. Yet her *Dictionary* should be listed

among these other pioneering works because of its approach and comprehensiveness.

Adams also is important because she was among the earliest American students of world religions. Others in America, from Cotton Mather to John Adams, had shown limited interest in non-Christian religions and cultures. After 1784, some American traders, travelers, and diplomats had direct contact with Asian religions. Amasa Delano (1763-1823), for example, published a *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, which described the religions of China and India. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, American Protestant missionaries who were filled with compassion for the lost souls in Asian and elsewhere sent back reports. William Bentley (1759-1819), the Unitarian minister of the East Church in Salem, learned Arabic and Persian and investigated Asian traditions from his second floor study. Bentley, who read Adams's books, also helped to spread and maintain interest in Asian, especially Chinese, traditions through his work for the East India Marine Society in Salem. But he failed to publish the results of his wide-ranging research in any systematic form. As far as I can tell, then, Adams's only serious rival for the title of American pioneer is Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the Unitarian scientist and author who emigrated to the United States in 1794. In 1799, fifteen years after the first edition of Adams's volume appeared, Priestly published *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations*. This book, however, was less comprehensive than Adams's: it focused on Hinduism and Judaism. It was much more explicitly polemical, too.

Adams might not have been the only American "prophet and pioneer" of the study of religion, as Jordon proclaimed; others played important roles. Yet, at the same time, most of the negative judgments of her significance seem unfair. While she failed to live up to the standards she set for herself, Adams managed to provide a remarkably inclusive and relatively impartial view of the religious landscape. I suggest that for what she attempted, as much as what she accomplished, Adams should be counted among the American pioneers of the study of religion.

In the remainder of this essay I consider the origin, method, and content of her groundbreaking book, *The Dictionary of All Religions*, focusing on the final, and most comprehensive, edition.

SURMOUNTING OBSTACLES

It was not easy for Adams to come to write her pioneering book.

Several obstacles stood in her way—sexism, shyness, and poverty as well as religious doubt, limited education, and “debilitating” reading. Driven by financial need and raging curiosity, Adams began writing the first edition of her survey in her house in Medfield, Massachusetts, in 1778. Medfield, where she had been raised, was an old New England town of Puritan heritage. She quickly discovered, however, that there was much beyond the established Congregational Church, which had been gathering in the town meeting house since 1653. The religious landscape included not only Baptists, the only “dissenting” group in Medfield during her lifetime (Tilden; *Medfield Reflections*), but also Swedenborgians and Moravians, Zoroastrians and Buddhists. At least at first, Adams wandered that broad religious plain disoriented by its vastness, surprised by its variability. And, as she acknowledged, the divergent beliefs of world religions and especially the competing claims of Christian groups disquieted her. “As I read controversy,” she recalled, “I suffered extremely from mental indecision, while pursuing the various and contradictory arguments adduced by men of piety and learning in defence of their respective religious systems. Sometimes my mind was so strongly excited, that extreme feeling obliged me for a time to lay aside my employment” (1832:14). She also was worried by “this great and painful truth”—that “heathens” and Muslims greatly outnumbered Christians (1817:375). Vast numbers remained beyond the boundaries of Christendom.

Adams also was unsettled by the vast terrain, in part, because she felt unprepared for the task of mapping it. Sometimes she hinted that her handicaps arose from fixed factors such as disposition or gender. For example, she traced the “mental indecision” she experienced as she confronted competing religious claims to inherited characteristics. Her mind, she explained, was “*naturally* wanting in firmness and decision” (1832:14). Most often she blamed her lack of formal education or her unwise reading habits. “Stimulated by an ardent curiosity,” she recalled years later, “I entered the vast field of religious controversy, for which my reading had ill prepared me” (1832:13). She had been too ill to attend school regularly, and, as one friend pointed out, the schools in rural communities in the 1760s and 1770s were not particularly good anyway. She had one important advantage: her bookish father encouraged her learning and guided her reading. Yet, like other women of the age, Adams complained that she had been hampered by reading too much “women’s literature,” which stimulated the sentiments, not the reason. She had been, to use her own words, “debilitated by reading Romances and novels, which are addressed to the fancy and the imagi-

nation" (1832:14-15). If only she had read works of theology like the young men training for the ministry at Harvard, Adams believed, she might have been better prepared to adjudicate the disputes she encountered as she surveyed the contradictory claims of Christian groups and world religions.

Of all the obstacles Adams faced as she set out to describe the religious landscape, the internal and external effects of sexism might have been the greatest. With the publication of the first edition of her survey, and the eight books and pamphlets that followed, Adams became the first woman in America to earn her living by writing. Even more than the next generation of liberal New England female authors such as Lydia Child and Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867), then, Adams had to struggle with the most basic issue: Is it proper, even possible, for women to earn a living by writing? Child and Sedgwick, at least, had the advantage of her example and that of others. Adams had to find her own way, and she felt the inhibiting pressures of sexism from within and without. On the one hand, she fought self-deprecating impulses all her life. Those impulses arose from her conviction that she had been poorly trained for her profession and from an awkwardness bred by the seclusion of her sickly childhood. Yet they were, no doubt, also rooted in socially constructed notions of gender identity. Reflecting and internalizing the ethos of her age, at times Adams called herself "a mere woman" (Gleason:81).²

But the inhibiting effects of sexism, and her personal history, did not immobilize Adams: she could be alternately bold and timid, self-satisfied and self-denigrating. She displayed uncommon boldness at times, especially in the line of professional duty. For example, on Christmas day in 1817 Adams showed up unannounced and uninvited at a Swedenborgian service held in a private residence in Boston. She came to conduct research, but her "informants" found her presence so disturbing that they cut the service short (Reed:121). She also felt free to ask prominent strangers to help her with her research. For example, she wrote to the busy John Carroll (1735-1815), the first American Catholic bishop, to request information on Catholics. After her first book she

²It is not especially useful to focus on the issue of whether Adams, or any other historical figure, was a feminist since that term is a twentieth-century invention. But since the question still arises, I will address it briefly. Adams was not a feminist by most definitions of the term. Nancy Cott, for instance, has suggested feminism involves three core components— opposition to sex hierarchy, belief in the social construction of gender roles, and the identification of women as a social as well as a biological group (1987:4-5). With the possible exception of the third component, Adams did not endorse explicitly in her published and unpublished writings any of these defining convictions.

also allowed herself some self-congratulation. Adams began to sense that books could be more than a way to survive. They might be useful. She might be useful. "It was poverty, not ambition, or vanity, that first induced me to become an author . . . but now I formed the flattering idea, that I might not only help myself, but benefit the public" (1832:22). Encouraged and advised by members of the Boston elite, she also mustered the courage to squabble publicly with the prominent Congregationalist minister, Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826), over the rights to the publication of a textbook on New England history (Adams 1814; Morse). On the other hand, it is important to remember that Adams might not have had the courage to publish if she had not been driven to it by the force of poverty. At least initially, she wrote because her father had failed miserably in business, and she needed to support herself and her sister. Further, she felt most at home alone with her books or in the company of a small group of female friends. Most other times, observers agreed, she seemed unsure of herself.

Adams, then, dipped her toes into the waters of the male public sphere cautiously and tentatively; once she took the plunge, she found that the currents ran both warm and cold. In some ways her gender, and the prevailing sexism, worked in her favor. Partly out of respect for her erudition and sympathy for her poverty, yet perhaps also from a condescending chivalry, a number of prominent Boston professionals befriended her. On 20 March 1827 male trustees at the Boston Athenaeum allowed her access to their forbidden halls. She was the first woman permitted entry to that important private library ("Trustees Records"). Earlier, the Reverend Joseph Stevens Buckminster (1784-1812), the young but influential Unitarian preacher, and President John Adams, a distant relative, invited her to browse their personal libraries so that she no longer would have to squat in booksellers' shops copying information for hours (Adams 1832:28,38,74-75). Local professionals wrote letters on her behalf. They vigorously defended her in the public debate with Morse. They even arranged to pay her an annual stipend so that she would not have to worry about money (Adams 1832:36-37). If being a woman was a main portion of her problem, it also helped attract aid—sincere and condescending—from the elite.

In most ways, however, her gender was yet another handicap. Adams acknowledged this in her typically cautious and self-deprecating way. In her *Memoir*, she quoted a passage from a biography of the British poet and novelist, Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), that complained that the "penalties and discouragements attending authors in general fall upon woman with double weight" (34). Adams then added a qualified

endorsement of this assessment: "Though I have been too insignificant, and treated with too much candor, fully to realize the above remarks, yet I have been in a situation deeply to feel the trials which attend literary pursuits" (35). Lydia Child was less hesitant to point out the negative effects of sexism for Adams and other female authors of the previous generation. Child wrote of Adams sixty years after the first edition of her *Dictionary of Religions* had appeared that "the prejudice against literary women was then much stronger than now." To illustrate, Child relayed a story, one of many that circulated about the learned but idiosyncratic Adams: "Some one happened to remark that they wondered why Hannah Adams had never been married, for she was really a very sensible and pleasant woman. 'Marry Hannah Adams!', exclaimed a gentleman who was present; 'why I should as soon think of marrying my Greek Grammar'" (1852:133-34). Aware of the presuppositions of her contemporaries and those of earlier generations, Child felt compelled to reassure readers that Adams had not been a textbook.³

A few men seemed able to acknowledge her intellectual accomplishments without reference to gender, but not many (Bentley 3:215). Ezra Stiles (1727-95), the erudite president of Yale, recorded this generous assessment in his diary for 25 September 1793: "Visited Miss Hannah Adams at 36 at Medfield and detained with her one day by NE Storm. She is an Authoress, & has read more than most persons of her age" (Dexter:507). Note that Stiles's qualification concerned age, not gender. He did not say that she had read rather widely for a woman. But most of those who admired her accomplishments could not see beyond the barrier of gender. Adams had dedicated the second edition of her compendium of religions to President John Adams. In return, he later praised her in one letter by saying that her writing had "done honor to your sex." As in this informal assessment, there often was a note of surprise, and a touch of condescension, in the adulation that Adams received.

ADAMS'S METHOD: "TO AVOID GIVING PREFERENCE"

Even if many of Adams's early readers emphasized her singularity as a female writer—always the qualification—she herself was able to look beyond gender to the issues that confronted all those who had tried to map the religious world. She did not claim originality in that task. In

³Adams's friend, Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, who wrote the "Additional Notices" affixed to Adams's posthumously published autobiography, also acknowledged that some contemporaries had thought of Adams as "a walking dictionary" (Adams 1832:49).

fact, Adams described herself—here again the self-deprecating impulse—as a “compiler” rather than an author (1832:22). Yet she boasted that her approach to the task was novel. She outlined her self-imposed guidelines in the “Advertisement” printed at the front of each edition. Adams vowed to be faithful to the self-understanding of those she described, using their own words wherever possible. She promised to offer a comprehensive and balanced view of the group’s history, worldview, and practices and not focus on isolated or unflattering incidents. Adams wanted to be fair to secondary sources—even when she felt compelled to alter their accounts because the authors had violated her most important methodological principle, scholarly disinterestedness. She aimed, most of all, “to avoid giving the least preference of one denomination above another.” Placing herself among the earliest Western students of religion to hold herself to such standards, Adams strove to avoid denigrating labels and withhold dismissive judgments.

In fact, she claimed that she had been driven to write her first book, in part, by outrage at other biased accounts. To earn money, her father took in young male boarders. One of them taught her Latin and Greek. He also brought into the house the survey of religions authored by Thomas Broughton (1704-1774), the British clergyman of the Church of England. That book, *An Historical Dictionary of All Religions from the Creation of the World to the Present*, changed her life. She was so annoyed by its hostile treatment of dissenting Christian sects and various non-Christian religions that she began to read everything she could find on religious history. Adams discovered that other writers were not much better, and so she resolved to write a more tolerant and accurate account: “I soon became disgusted with the want of candor in the authors I consulted, in giving the most unfavorable descriptions of the denominations they disliked, and applying to them the names of heretics, fanatics, enthusiasts, & I therefore made a plan for myself, made a blank book, and wrote rules for transcribing, and adding to my compilation” (1832:11).

ADAMS’S VIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS WORLD

For Adams, the problem with Broughton’s book, and others like it, began with the scheme for classifying religions. It was bivalent. Religions could be divided into two groups—true and false. Although Judaism was a bit closer to the true religion than the others since it was of divine origin, all other non-Christian traditions were dismissed as wholly and unambiguously false. The diversity that any student of reli-

gion encounters, even using eighteenth-century sources, was, finally, dissolved. "The first general division of Religion is into True and False," Broughton wrote. "That infinite variety, therefore, in the doctrines and modes of worship, which have prevailed in the world (one only scheme excepted) are but so many deviations from the truth, so many False Religions" (1). Broughton did distinguish "four grand religions of the world"—"Pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan." He also sometimes distinguished religions chronologically into "antient" and "modern." But these distinctions remained unimportant for Broughton. To him, the religious landscape appeared rather limited in scope—and not especially forbidding or unsettling.

If Adams had been able to accept Broughton's classification, her initial disorientation at the vastness of the religious field might have been reduced or eliminated. What diversity? Which competing claims? But she could not accept that bivalent scheme. Even though Adams clearly favored Christianity, she did not merely separate religions and sects into the true and the false. For the most part, as promised, she also avoided negative labels. But, as a person of her era who was restricted by her sources, Adams also did not alter significantly the basic map of the religious world that she had inherited. In fact, the most basic contours of that map had changed little since the voyages of discovery. New peoples and religions were added here. New boundaries were drawn there. But until approximately the second quarter of the nineteenth century the religious world still was populated by Christians, Jews, Muslims, and "Pagans" or "Heathens." Christians, as those following the revealed religion, stood in the highest position. Jews were second best. Muslims, because they shared a monotheistic faith and some common heritage, stood next in the hierarchy. For Adams and most of her contemporaries, the final category, "Heathens" or "Pagans," included an extremely wide range of groups and peoples. In the entry under "Pagans" in her *Dictionary*, for instance, Adams listed four subgroups of those who stand outside the traditions of the monotheistic West. The first two included the religions of various ancient peoples (Greeks and Romans as well as "Chaldeans, Phenicians, and Sabians, etc. . . ."). Next came the major Asian religions ("the Chinese, Hindoos, Japanese, &"). Finally, Adams listed the religions of non-literate peoples (the "barbarians" of the Americas, the South Seas, and Africa).⁴

⁴For example, the classification scheme used by Thomas Jefferson, the Deist (Pancake:326,334); Joseph Tuckerman, the Unitarian (183); Ezra Stiles, the Trinitarian Congregationalist (132); and David Benedict, the Baptist (1-51), was basically the same.

Adams's map of the religious world might seem distorted and crude by contemporary standards, yet it was an advance over Broughton's sketch, and that of many others. She not only avoided a bivalent classification that undercut all subsequent distinctions and overvalued one tradition, but her coverage of "heathen" religions was more judicious and comprehensive. The dictionary format itself—instead of Broughton's thematic organization—also added to the reader's sense of the vastness and variability of the terrain.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam

Adams covered most of the religious world in one way or another, but Christianity received disproportionate attention. In fact, more than eighty-five percent of the more than seven hundred entries deal with "orthodox" or "heterodox" Christian groups or ideas. This is not surprising since Adams was a committed Christian of Congregationalist heritage and Unitarian inclinations who wrote decades before the formal rise of the field of comparative religion. But, to a large extent, she managed to set aside her heritage and inclinations as she composed her accounts of Christian sects.⁵

Adams wrote those accounts by sifting through primary and secondary sources for relevant information and then modifying the received interpretations according to her particular purposes and methodological principles. With few exceptions, the secondary sources that she found most helpful were travel accounts, sermons, histories, or encyclopedia entries written by Christians who were not afraid to reveal their evaluations of the groups they described. Two of her most often cited sources, for instance, were Broughton's *Dictionary* (the book that had annoyed her so much) and Johann Lorenz von Mosheim's (1694-1755) *An Ecclesiastical History, Antient and Modern, from the Birth of Christ to the Present*

⁵Adams's works on Christianity offer a glimpse of her religious views (1804; 1824). She explicitly sided with the Unitarians in her *Memoirs* (43). Besides being friends with important early Unitarian ministers such as James Freeman and Joseph Buckminster she also apparently went to hear the most famous and important Unitarian preacher of her day, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842). The membership records of Channing's church in Boston, Federal Street Church, do not include her name (Unitarian-Universalist Archives, Special Collections, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge). Yet other evidence suggests that Adams regularly heard Channing preach. "She attended Dr. Channing's church," Lydia Child recalled, "and had great personal respect for him" (1852:132). There are different ways to date the opening of the field of the "science of religions" or "comparative religions." I follow William Clebsch, who argued that the field formally arose in 1870, when Friedrich Max Müller in London and Émile Louis Burnouf in Paris independently and simultaneously called for a "scientific" study of religions (6).

Century. The latter, a multi-volume work written by the influential German Lutheran church historian, was no more gentle with opposing views than Broughton's survey. In dealing with these secondary sources, Adams usually did what she promised: she omitted deprecatory labels and adjectives as she recorded information. Her treatment of the Anabaptists, that group of Protestants who often suffered persecution in Europe because of their unconventional beliefs, is typical. Mosheim had not minced words as he described "the frenzy of their disordered brains and the madness of their pretensions and projects." He called them "fanatical" and "outrageous" (3:363, 4:129-64). Only a hint of Mosheim's condemnation survives in Adam's account, however. In a much abbreviated description, she portrayed them as "a sect which arose in the time of Luther's Reformation in Germany, and excited various insurrections, under pretence of erecting the kingdom of Christ on earth." That word "pretence" is a bit loaded. By using it Adams implied that their claims were false. Yet overall, as with most accounts of Christian groups, the entry on Anabaptists in Adams's *Dictionary* was much less dismissive than that found in her sources.

Of the many Christian groups that Adams described, most of them were as controversial as the Anabaptists. Many of them, in fact, were more controversial. She paid a great deal of attention to groups and ideas that lost in the battle for Christian orthodoxy. Of course, most of the traditional Christian groups and positions are represented in her book. There are, for example, the expected depictions of "Protestants," "Roman Catholics," "Lutherans," and "Calvinists." Yet most of the entries on Christian topics concern dissenting viewpoints. Various Gnostic groups and positions—including Manichaeism, which was viewed as a Christian heresy—receive a surprising amount of coverage. Arians, Pelegians, and many other interpreters of doctrine who had been stamped as "heretical" by some official church body found their way into her overview too.

Adams provided a glimpse of other dissenting groups and new sects in America. For example, she offered an extremely long account (ten and a half pages) of the Universalists, the denomination that emerged in the late eighteenth century. She sneered at Deism, the view that emphasized natural and not supernatural sources of religious knowledge and that was embraced by a small but influential collection of intellectuals. She described Moravians, Swedenborgians, and members of the Church of Brethren. Adams also sketched especially interesting portraits of the Shakers and the Universal Friends, two new communitarian sects that emerged from the revival, or "New Light Stir," that swept across rural

New England in the late eighteenth century (Marini). Adding to the significance of these new groups for readers then and now, both sects were founded by women. The Shakers, or The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, were brought to America from England in 1774 when Ann Lee Stanley (1736-84) emigrated with eight followers. The Universal Friends, which was established by Jemima Wilkinson (1752-1819), flourished in Rhode Island and Connecticut from 1776 to 1789. Adherents of both communities held a number of unconventional views; but they, like the other dissenters that Adams described, claimed to be orthodox Christians.⁶

The cumulative effect of Adams's treatment of Christianity, in America and elsewhere, was to highlight conflict and variety. Adams, perhaps only after she finished the first draft, realized this. A good deal of the anxiety that she experienced no doubt arose as she read and recorded competing accounts of the nature of Christianity. In the appendix of her book she tried to deal with the psychological discomfort and theological problems such a treatment might create. There she, first, bluntly acknowledged that "the diversity of sentiment among Christians has been exhibited in the preceding pages." She went on, however, to reassure her readers that this need not challenge their faith. "The candid mind," Adams continued, "will not consider those various opinions as an argument against divine revelation. The truth of the sacred writings is attested by the strongest evidence . . ." (371-72). She then listed the evidence. Miracles and prophecies safeguarded the authority of revealed religion. So did the coherence of the scriptures, the rapid spread of the gospel, the purity of Christian precepts, and the "benevolent" impulse of Christian social ethics. Further, the diversity need not be so disorienting, she implied, since Christians—true Christians—have agreed on several fundamental doctrinal matters. Modifying slightly the famous summary of Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), Adams claimed that all agree that (1) there is a supreme being; (2) this being is worthy of worship; (3) that Jesus is the appointed representative of this being; (4) that there will be some sort of resurrection of the dead; and (5) that virtue will be rewarded and vice punished in a future life.

Whether or not she and her readers found the defense of Christianity affixed to her dictionary reassuring, there were other theological

⁶Although I cannot explore this here, Adams's *Dictionary* provides an excellent angle of vision from which to view the increasing diversity and shifting contours of American religion from the Revolution through the Second Great Awakening (see Adams 1992:xvii-xviii).

problems on the horizon. What do we make of the Jews? Scriptures prophesied, Adams believed, that the Jews would turn to Christianity before the end of the world and Christ's reappearance. Yet they remained unconverted. What, she asked herself, is the Christian's obligation in this context? She had an answer: it is to help bring Jews to the true faith and so fulfill Biblical prophecy and culminate sacred history. The entry on Adams in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* claims that her *Dictionary* is "significant for the sympathetic tone of the article on the Jews"; and there is much truth in this assessment (Roth). For example, she seemed genuinely disturbed by their history of persecution. She also received information on Judaism from sympathetic correspondents like Henri Baptiste Grégoire (1750-1831), the famous French bishop who pleaded for tolerance toward Jews. And, in fact, the account of Judaism in Adams's survey is free of derisive comments or demeaning labels. In general, she provided a fair portrait.

Yet, in her treatment of Judaism, she also added a substantial description of "The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews." This might seem odd, even condescending or annoying, to some modern readers, but this "benevolent" cause was dear to Adams's heart. Like the members of this British organization, Adams was "devoutly waiting for the redemption of Israel" (1816:3). This hope, together with her admiration for Jewish persistence and her sorrow at Jewish suffering, helped animate her long labors on her two-volume study of the history of that religion. *The History of the Jews from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the Present Time*, published in the United States in 1812 and later in British and German editions, was well received. In particular, the members of the London group praised her work. Adams corresponded with its members and leaders, and she even established an American branch. On 5 June 1816, the year before the last edition of her *Dictionary* appeared, Adams founded "The Female Society of Boston and the Vicinity for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews" (Societies). She acted as its corresponding secretary. Her commitment to this cause did not disable her as a scholar. As I have indicated, and others have noted, Adams's depiction of Judaism in her *Dictionary* certainly was not hostile. Yet, to the attentive reader, her passionate concern to bring the Jews to Christianity was not entirely hidden either.

For Adams, Islam did not fit into the divine plan in quite the way that the Jews did. Her coverage reflected that belief. Yet Adams did include seven entries on Islam. She acknowledged the two main branches of Islam in one-line descriptions under "Schaites" (Shi'ites)

and "Somnites" (Sunni). Two important Islamic movements are mentioned as well. Adams offered a fifty-five line account of Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition. Incorporating more recent developments, Adams also recounted the history and beliefs of the Wahhabi movement ("Wahabees"). Wahhabism, which rejected Sufism, was an Islamic reform movement founded by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92). As Adams noted, Wahhab emphasized, among other things, the unity of God and condemned the growing polytheism found in the popular veneration of Muslim saints. But the most important, and comprehensive, depiction of Islam was found in the four-and-one-half page entry under the term "Mahometans." In general, Adams represented the tradition fairly. She recounted the familiar details of Muhammad's life, even offering some praise: "He was endowed with a subtle genius, and possessed of great enterprise and ambition." She also provided a relatively sound overview of common Muslim beliefs. As promised, she let adherents speak for themselves by quoting from one original source.

Her portrait of Islam was less hostile than that drawn by many other Westerners of her day, but her commitments and concerns found their way into the account in small ways too. For instance, she spoke of Muhammad's "pretensions" to a divine mission. She also anticipated a concern of her Christian readers: Islam had spread widely and rapidly, and some Muslims had cited this as evidence of its veracity—as Adams and others had pointed to Christianity's success to support Christian claims to divine origin. In her main entry on Islam, Adams offered a response: Muhammad's success was tainted. He "contrived by permission of polygamy and concubinage to make his creed palatable to the most depraved of mankind." Perpetuating another Western stereotype, she claimed that the founder also propagated his message by the sword. In other words, Christians need not be disturbed by the success of Islam since it attracted the most undesirable persons by the most violent means.

"Heathenism"

Beyond the boundaries of the three Western monotheistic religions lay that vast and mostly uncharted territory that Adams and her contemporaries called "heathenism." The more than thirty-five entries on "heathen" or "pagan" traditions in Adams's *Dictionary* refer to the religions of Asian countries or ancient peoples, literate and non-literate.

Among the several "ancient nations" of the Middle East and Europe that Adams depicted was Egypt, the most "renowned" and "refined."

In separate entries she also noted the religions of the Babylonians, Greeks, Canaanites, and Celts. The Celts, for instance, were "one of the primitive nations by which most parts of Europe were peopled." She referred to the Druids, the priestly class that presided over the ritual sacrifices of the Celts, in this main article and in a separate entry.

Several entries also dealt with the religions of non-literate peoples in Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific. Mostly because of recent interest shown by Christian missionaries, Adams's account of the "South Sea Islanders" was relatively substantial. A passing reference to the significance of thunder for natives in Brazil is found elsewhere in the volume ("Brazilians"), but the primary account of the natives of the Americas is found in the entry on "Indians." That five-page entry surveys the traditions of North, Central, and South America. As expected, Adams distorted the beliefs and practices of this great variety of peoples in some ways, but her account was remarkably free of open hostility. This might be even more surprising since she would have been educated in the local lore of her home town, and that lore included the story of an Indian raid that wiped out most of Medfield. We cannot know to what extent Adams saw native peoples as violent barbarians; but, with few exceptions, she managed to avoid dismissive labels and derogatory asides. (She did mention, however, "the *savage* tribes of Guiana.") Even where her account might seem to lead toward negative judgments, Adams sometimes invited the reader to pause just short of unqualified condemnation. For example, she anticipated and softened the implied criticism of the Amazonian tribes' use of religion to sanction war by comparing them to nominal Christians in the "civilized" West: "Upon their going out to war they hoist at the prow of their canoes that idol, under whose auspices they look for victory; but *like too many Christians*, they never pray to their gods, except in cases of difficulty, when they feel their need of divine assistance or support" (1817:142, emphasis added).

Adams devoted three pages to the devotions of other native peoples—those of Africa ("Negroes"). She failed to cite Charles de Brosses's book, *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, but she relied heavily on a term that de Brosses had introduced ("fetishism") to interpret the beliefs and practices of these tribes. She hinted that Africans approximate the beliefs of Westerners in their common affirmation of "a supreme Being" and "a future state." The implication, which few of her readers would have missed, was that there is some hope for these non-Christians since a residue of an original monotheism and the distorted outlines of right belief could be found among them. Yet Adams allowed the condescending and Christian-centered perspective of her sources to seep into her

account. In its most benign form, this perspective yielded a portrait of exotic tribes who worship the divine through the forms of nature—mountains, trees, and birds. In its most hostile form, some West Africans (the inhabitants of Benin) were portrayed as devil-worshippers. These pagans, Adams and her sources reported incredulously, even add to their offense by portraying this demonic figure as—the word was italicized for emphasis—*white*.

Some residue of incredulity, condescension, even hostility, can be found in Adams's accounts of Asian peoples and religions too. Yet, in general, Adams fairly transmitted the received knowledge about Asia. In her descriptions of Asian traditions, as throughout the volume, she always was more generous and judicious than the authors she consulted. For Adams, and the authors she read, Asian religions included Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto. Actually, the Western intellectuals who read about Asian religions—and the traders, missionaries, and diplomats who encountered them directly—often had difficulty distinguishing among them. Until the middle of the nineteenth century or so, "The Orient" remained a single mass of "otherness"—even for many of the most sophisticated writers. The commonalities, most Western interpreters agreed, seemed much more important than the differences among them. The Asian religions were not-Christian. Asians themselves were, well, not-us. For those interested in making more precise distinctions, the sources were limited and contradictory. Confusions persisted. As late as 1845, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most sympathetic and influential American students of Asian religions, mistakenly identified the *Bhagavad Gita* as that "much renowned book of Buddhism" (Rusk 3:179).

Among late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Americans who could draw distinctions, Confucianism and Hinduism were most widely known and appreciated. Systematic trade with China opened in 1784, and so Americans, especially on the major sea ports of the east coast, began their rather unsystematic introduction to its culture. Americans influenced by the Enlightenment were less enamored of Confucianism than many of their most prominent European counterparts, but still they followed the British and Continental pattern by celebrating the discovery of a tolerant and rational "natural religion" in Confucianism. The year 1784 also was important for the Western awareness of Hinduism. It was then that Sir William Jones and a small group of British gentlemen founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Royal Asiatic Society). That society's journal would help to introduce Americans to Asian religions in general and Hinduism in particular. (At Ezra Stiles's suggestion, Adams

consulted that journal as she wrote the last two editions of her book [Stiles 1794].) Buddhism, on the other hand, was only beginning to be understood. The first Pali grammar in a European language did not appear until 1826 (Burnouf and Lassen), and Eugène Burnouf would not publish his pathfinding survey of Indian Buddhism until more than a decade after Adams died. Buddhism's origins remained obscured; and, as the passage from Emerson's letter indicates, interpreters often confused it with Hinduism. Daoism and Shinto, the other Asian religions known to Adams, were noted in passing in surveys of the time; but those traditions remained relatively unknown until the end of the nineteenth century.

In the first edition of her survey, Adams conflated and confined Asian religions in a long appendix, but by the fourth edition the treatment had been expanded and, in some cases, refined. Perhaps more important, Adams followed the lead of a British editor of her book and inserted separate entries for Asian religions among the existing accounts of Western and non-literate traditions. The arrangement had become alphabetical, not theological. The religions of Asia, while still remote, finally had found a place on the map, and the fourth edition was Adams's most textured delineation of the religious world. In that edition, Adams covered Asia in thirteen entries. Those entries remind us that her world is not ours. Her Asia is not ours. She ignored completely some traditions that originated in Asia. For instance, in the main entry on India ("Hindoos") she overlooked two traditions that originated there, Jainism and Sikhism. Adams included a separate entry for Shinto ("Sintoos") but not Daoism or Confucianism ("Chinese").

"Hindoos," however, did receive substantial attention in a five-page entry. Relying on the reports of Baptist missionaries and the investigations published in *Asiatik Researches*, and especially the pioneering work of Sir William Jones, Adams put together an account that included most of the beliefs and practices that had fascinated—and repulsed—early Western observers. She claimed, or implied, Western parallels: In their belief in Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the sustainer, and Shiva, the destroyer, Hindus affirm a "three-fold divinity." Using Western language to record Hindu beliefs, she noted that adherents acknowledged a number of Vishnu's "incarnations." Hindu ritual sacrifices seemed to resemble those of the Jews. Distorting the Indian tradition, Adams also followed one source in reporting that "the necessity of some *atonement* for *sin* is one of the prevailing ideas among the Hindoos." As with the continuities she found in non-literate religions, these parallels between Hinduism and the Judeo-Christian tradition would have reassured her

readers that there were bits of religious truth buried beneath the layers of superstition. But some beliefs and practices seemed so discontinuous, and so barbaric, that interpreters could not hide their horror. For instance, Adams, and other Westerners, focused on the practice of *sati*: "There subsists to this day among the Hindoos a voluntary sacrifice of too singular and shocking a nature to pass unnoticed; which is that of wives burning themselves with the bodies of their deceased husbands" (1817:110).

Adams's Western, even explicitly Christian, outlook shaped her description of Hinduism in other ways too. She included a description of Protestant missionary activity in India, for instance. Even one of Hinduism's acknowledged virtues, tolerance, was turned against the tradition. Adams recorded Sir William Jones's observation—and there is much truth in it—that the lack of missionary success in India could be traced to Hindus' tendency to embrace Jesus as one more incarnation of Vishnu. That might be one possible strategy for incorporating Christian and Hindu beliefs, but Adams and most of her contemporaries were not interested in synthesis. They preferred conversions. Even Hindu inclusivism, then, came to be seen as an annoying trait.

Adams's assessment of Buddhism was scattered in five entries. It was scattered because Adams failed to see fully the connections among the various forms of Asian Buddhism. There was no single overview article. Instead descriptions appeared, often using different key terms, in portraits of religion in Burma ("Birmins"), Japan ("Budso" and "Japanese"), China ("Chinese"), and Tibet ("Thibetians"). There was no discussion of Buddhism in India because, like other Western interpreters before the mid-nineteenth century, Adams did not realize that the origins of that same tradition that had spread throughout Asia were to be found in India. She saw that Chinese and Burmese Buddhism had been transplanted from India. In the entry on Burmese Buddhism she noted that it "originated from the same source as the Hindoo but differs in some of its tenets." Viewing Burmese Buddhism from the perspective of Indian Hinduism, she reported that adherents worship "Boodh," the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. Adams also noted the Indian roots of "the sect of Foe" (Buddhism) in China (see "Chinese"). But Westerners in general, and Adams in particular, did not yet have the textual sources or linguistic skills to fully understand Buddhism's Indian beginnings or to find the link between the teachings of China's "Foe" and Burma's "Boodh."

Yet her evaluation of Buddhism was more nuanced than that of Hinduism. It was less consistently and explicitly negative. Tibetan Bud-

dhism, for instance, seemed only slightly worse off than Roman Catholicism. Like Western interpreters for centuries, Adams stressed the parallels. Tibetans, of course, did not know of divine revelation in Jesus, but they did have monks, beads, incense, icons, and even a "pope" (the Dalai Lama). Drawing on an interpretive tradition established by the narratives of Jean Baptiste DuHalde (1674-1743) and Per Osbeck (1723-1805), Adams distinguished between popular ("external doctrine") and elite ("internal doctrine") forms of Chinese Buddhism. Adams, and the writers she consulted, liked the popular form much better. The "priests" of that popular Buddhism—presumably she meant Pure Land—extorted money from the followers; yet, in general, that sect seemed benign, even positive. They seemed to believe in reward and punishment in a future life. Their ethics also seemed praiseworthy: "They enjoin all works of mercy and charity; and forbid cheating, impurity, wine, lying, and murder; and even the taking of life from any creature." On the other hand, Adams closely followed her direct source, Osbeck, in describing the elite tradition of Chinese Buddhism as a negation of all that the West held dear. "The internal doctrine of this sect, which is kept secret from the common people," Adams reported, "teaches a philosophical atheism, which admits neither rewards nor punishments after death; and believes not in a providence, or the immortality of the soul; acknowledges no other god than the *void*, or *nothing*; and makes the supreme happiness of mankind to consist in a total *inaction*, an *entire insensibility*, and a *perfect quietude*."

CONCLUSION

In the above passage, and a few others, Adams seemed to violate her methodological principles by recording, almost word for word, misleading or negative descriptions. She sometimes seemed blind to the ways in which a borrowed term or phrase violated her commitment to impartiality. Yet, to her credit, she never treated a sect or religion more hostilely than her sources had. Even if she failed to comply fully with her announced guidelines, her *Dictionary* advanced the study of religion. It did so because she so consistently approximated the impartiality she had sought and, even more, simply because she had articulated such goals in the first place. Her commitment to scholarly disinterestedness, together with her careful scrutiny and critical treatment of available sources, placed her at the forefront of early Western efforts to understand the religious world.

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falacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Be it enacted by
SECTION II. We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor

shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, or shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

SECTION III. And though we well know that this assembly, elected by the people for their ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operations, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

7. A PETITION RELATING TO CHURCH ESTABLISHMENT (1786)

This petition is in Madison's handwriting and it is probable that he was instrumental in drafting it. A Bill for the Incorporation of the Protestant Episcopal Church was passed by the Assembly in 1785 which gave considerable autonomy to the Church. By the next session of the Assembly the statute was under attack and it was repealed early in 1787.

*To the honourable the Speaker & Gentlemen
The General Assembly of Virginia:*

We the subscribers members of the protestant episcopal Church claim the attention of your honourable Body to our objections to the law passed at the last Session of Assembly for incorporating the protestant Episcopal church; and we remonstrate against the said law—

Because the law admits the power of the

Legislative Body to interfere in matters of Religion which we think is not included in their jurisdiction.

Because the law was passed on the petition of some of the Clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church without any application from the other members of that Church on whom the law is to operate, and we conceive it to be highly improper that the Legislature should regard as the sense of the whole Church the opinion of a few inter-

ested members who were in most instances originally imposed on the people without their consent & who were not authorized by even the smallest part of this community to make such a proposition.

Because the law constitutes the Clergy members of a convention who are to legislate for the laity contrary to their fundamental right of chusing their own Legislators.

Because by that law the most obnoxious & unworthy Clergyman cannot be removed from a parish except by the determination of a body, one half of whom the people have no confidence in & who will always

have the same interest with the minister whose conduct they are to judge of.

Because—by that law power is given to the convention to regulate matters of faith & the obsequious vestries are to engage to change their opinions as often as the convention shall alter theirs.

Because a system so absurd and servile will drive the members of the Episcopal Church over to the Sects where there will be more consistency & liberty.

We therefore hope that the wisdom & impartiality of the present assembly will incline them to repeal a law so pregnant with mischief & injustice.

8. HOUSE AND SENATE DEBATES (1789)

Adoption of the United States Constitution was very controversial. In response to concerns that the Constitution did not adequately protect individual liberties, James Madison introduced a number of amendments that he called a "bill of rights." The following excerpts from the House and Senate debates show the progress of the proposals that ultimately became the religion clauses of the First Amendment.

DEBATES IN CONGRESS JUNE 8, 1789

Mr. MADISON . . . The amendments which have occurred to me, proper to be recommended by Congress to the State Legislatures, are these:

. . . That in article 1st, section 9, between clauses 3 and 4, be inserted these clauses, to wit: The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed. . . .

That in article 1st, section 10, between

clauses 1 and 2, be inserted this clause, to wit:

No State shall violate the equal rights of conscience, or the freedom of the press, or the trial by jury in criminal cases.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15 [1789]

The House again went into a Committee of the whole on the proposed amendments to the constitution, Mr. BOUDINOT in the chair.

The fourth proposition being under consideration, as follows:

Article 1. Section 9. Between paragraphs two and three insert "no religion shall be

The text of the House debate can be found in *Annals of the Congress of the United States: The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, Vol. I, compiled from Authentic Materials by Joseph Gales, Sr. (Washington, D.C., 1834). The Senate debates can be found in *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America*, ed. Linda Grant Depauw (Baltimore, 1977).

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established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed."

Mr. SYLVESTER had some doubts of the propriety of the mode of expression used in this paragraph. . . . He feared it might be thought to have a tendency to abolish religion altogether.

Mr. VINING suggested the propriety of transposing the two members of the sentence.

Mr. GERRY said it would read better if it was, that no religious doctrine shall be established by law.

Mr. SHERMAN thought the amendment altogether unnecessary, inasmuch as Congress had no authority whatever delegated to them by the constitution to make religious establishments; he would, therefore, move to have it struck out.

Mr. CARROLL.—As the rights of conscience are, in their nature, of peculiar delicacy, and will little bear the gentlest touch of governmental hand; and as many sects have concurred in opinion that they are not well secured under the present constitution, he said he was much in favor of adopting the words. . . . He would not contend with gentlemen about the phraseology. . . .

Mr. MADISON said, he apprehended the meaning of the words to be, that Congress should not establish a religion, and enforce the legal observation of it by law, nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience. Whether the words are necessary or not, he did not mean to say, but they had been required by some of the State Conventions, who seemed to entertain an opinion that under the clause of the constitution, which gave power to Congress to make all laws necessary and proper to carry into execution the constitution, and the laws made under it, enabled them to make laws of such a nature as might infringe the rights of conscience, and establish a national religion; to prevent these effects he presumed the amendment was intended, and he thought it as well expressed as the nature of the language would admit.

Mr. HUNTINGTON said that he feared, with the gentleman first up on this subject, that the words might be taken in such latitude as to be extremely hurtful to the cause of religion. He understood the amendment to mean what had been expressed by the gentleman from Virginia; but others might find it convenient to put another construction upon it. . . .

By the charter of Rhode Island, no religion could be established by law; he could give a history of the effects of such a regulation; indeed the people were now enjoying the blessed fruits of it. He hoped, therefore, the amendment would be made in such a way as to secure the rights of conscience, and a free exercise of the rights of religion, but not to patronize those who professed no religion at all.

Mr. MADISON thought, if the word national was inserted before religion, it would satisfy the minds of honorable gentlemen. He believed that the people feared one sect might obtain a pre-eminence, or two combine together, and establish a religion to which they would compel others to conform. He thought if the word national was introduced, it would point the amendment directly to the object it was intended to prevent.

Mr. LIVERMORE was not satisfied with that amendment; but he did not wish them to dwell long on the subject. He thought it would be better if it was altered, and made to read in this manner, that Congress shall make no laws touching religion, or infringing the rights of conscience.

Mr. GERRY did not like the term national, proposed by the gentleman from Virginia, and he hoped it would not be adopted by the House. . . .

Mr. MADISON withdrew his motion, but observed that the words "no national religion shall be established by law," did not imply that the Government was a national one; the question was then taken on Mr. LIVERMORE's motion, and passed in the affirmative, thirty-one for, and twenty against it. . . .

MONDAY, AUGUST 17 [1789]

The committee then proceeded to the fifth proposition:

Article 1. section 10. between the first and second paragraph, insert "no State shall infringe the equal rights of conscience, nor the freedom of speech or of the press, nor of the right of trial by jury in criminal cases."

Mr. TUCKER.—This is offered, I presume, as an amendment to the constitution of the United States, but it goes only to the alteration of the constitutions of particular States. It will be much better, I apprehend, to leave the State Governments to themselves, and not to interfere with them more than we already do; and that is thought by many to be rather too much. I therefore move, sir, to strike out these words.

Mr. MADISON conceived this to be the most valuable amendment to the whole list. If there was any reason to restrain the Government of the United States from infringing upon these essential rights, it was equally necessary that they should be secured against the State Governments. He thought that if they provided against the one, it was as necessary to provide against the other, and was satisfied that it would be equally grateful to the people.

Mr. LIVERMORE had no great objection to the sentiment, but he thought it not well expressed. He wished to make it an affirmative proposition; "the equal rights of conscience, the freedom of speech or of the press, and the right of trial by jury in criminal cases, shall not be infringed by any State."

This transposition being agreed to, and Mr. TUCKER's motion being rejected, the clause was adopted. . . .

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20 [1789]

The House resumed the consideration of the report of the Committee of the whole on the subject of amendment to the constitution. . . .

On motion of Mr. AMES, the fourth

amendment was altered so as to read "Congress shall make no law establishing religion, or to prevent the free exercise thereof, or to infringe the rights of conscience." This being adopted,

The first proposition was agreed to. . . .

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On Motion, To amend Article third, and to strike out these words, "Religion or prohibiting the free Exercise thereof," and insert, "One Religious Sect or Society in preference to others," It passed in the Negative.

On Motion, For reconsideration, It passed in the affirmative.

On Motion, That Article the third be stricken out, It passed, in the Negative.

On Motion, To adopt the following, in lieu of the third Article, "Congress shall not make any law infringing the rights of conscience, or establishing any Religious Sect or Society," It passed in the Negative.

On Motion, To amend the third Article, to read thus—"Congress shall make no law establishing any particular denomination of religion in preference to another, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed"—It passed in the Negative.

On Motion, To adopt the third Article proposed in the Resolve of the House of Representatives, amended by striking out these words—"Nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed"—It passed in the Affirmative.

[On September 7, 1789, the Senate rejected (without any record of the debates) the amendment passed by the House of Representatives that would prohibit the states from infringing the rights of conscience.]

SEPTEMBER 9, 1789

. . . [The Senate agreed] To amend Article the third, to read as follows "Congress shall

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make no law establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion. . . .

DEBATES IN CONGRESS
SEPTEMBER 24, 1789

The House proceeded to consider the report of a Committee of Conference, on the subject matter of the amendments depending between the two Houses to the several articles of amendment to the Constitution of the United States, as proposed by this House: whereupon, it was resolved, that

they recede from their disagreement to all the amendments; provided that the two articles, which, by the amendments of the Senate, are now proposed to be inserted as the third and eighth articles, shall be amended to read as follows:

ART. 3. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting a free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. . . .

9. OCCASIONAL LETTERS REGARDING RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT

To some extent informal letters written during the later years of Jefferson's and Madison's lives are at least as important in understanding their attitudes toward the question of "Church and State" as the formal documents they drafted or the constitutional arrangements they contrived. The following represent rather than exhaust this kind of source.

Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

Readers will note how the letter is a wholly conventional response, and might question whether it provides a likely foundation for the "wall of separation" it allegedly supports.

MESSRS. NEHEMIAH DODGE, EPHRAIM ROB-
BINS, AND STEPHEN S. NELSON, A COMMIT-
TEE OF THE DANBURY BAPTIST ASSOCIA-
TION, IN THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT.

January 1, 1802.

Gentlemen—The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on be-

half of the Danbury Baptist Association, give me the highest satisfaction. My duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and

From *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington, Vol. VIII (New York, 1854), pp. 113 f.

James Madison on Separation of Church and State

All quotation taken from Robert S. Alley, ed., *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, pp. 37-94.

James Madison (1751-1836) is popularly known as the "Father of the Constitution." More than any other framer he is responsible for the content and form of the First Amendment. His understanding of federalism is the theoretical basis of our Constitution. He served as President of the United States between 1809-1817.

Madison's most famous statement on behalf of religious liberty was his [Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments](#), which he wrote to oppose a bill that would have authorized tax support for Christian ministers in the state of Virginia.

Other sources for Madison's beliefs are his [letter to Jasper Adams](#), where he argues on behalf of letting religion survive on its own merits, and a [1792 article](#) in which he suggests that there is no specific religious sanction for American government.

Finally, a good deal of Madison's [Detached Memoranda](#) concerns the issue of religious liberty. This material is particularly important in that it gives Madison's views of a number of events that are sometimes disputed by accomodationists (eg., congressional chaplains, days of prayer, etc.).

Direct references to separation:

- The civil Government, though bereft of everything like an associated hierarchy, possesses the requisite stability, and performs its functions with complete success, whilst the number, the industry, and the morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people, have been manifestly increased by the *total separation of the church from the State* (*Letter to Robert Walsh*, Mar. 2, 1819).
- Strongly guarded as is the *separation between religion and & Gov't* in the Constitution of the United States the danger of encroachment by Ecclesiastical Bodies, may be illustrated by precedents already furnished in their short history (*Detached Memoranda*, circa 1820).
- Every new and successful example, therefore, of a *perfect separation between the ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance*; and I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together (*Letter to Edward Livingston*, July 10, 1822).

I must admit moreover that it may not be easy, in every possible case, to trace the *line of separation between the rights of religion and the civil authority* with such distinctness as to avoid collisions and doubts on unessential points. The tendency to a usurpation on one side or the other or to a corrupting coalition or alliance between them will be best guarded against by entire abstinence of the government from interference in any way whatever, beyond the necessity of preserving public order and protecting each sect against trespasses on its legal rights by others. (*Letter Rev. Jasper Adams*, Spring 1832).

- To the Baptist Churches on Neal's Greek on Black Creek, North Carolina I have received, fellow-citizens, your address, approving my objection to the Bill containing a grant of public land to the Baptist Church at Salem Meeting House, Mississippi Territory. Having always regarded the *practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government* as essential to the purity of both, and as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States, I could not have otherwise discharged my

duty on the occasion which presented itself (*Letter to Baptist Churches in North Carolina*, June 3, 1811).

Madison's summary of the First Amendment:

Congress should not establish a religion and enforce the legal observation of it by law, nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience, or that one sect might obtain a pre-eminence, or two combined together, and establish a religion to which they would compel others to conform (*Annals of Congress*, Sat Aug 15th, 1789 pages 730 - 731).

Against establishment of religion

- The experience of the United States is a happy disproof of the error so long rooted in the unenlightened minds of well-meaning Christians, as well as in the corrupt hearts of persecuting usurpers, that without a legal incorporation of religious and civil polity, neither could be supported. A mutual independence is found most friendly to practical Religion, to social harmony, and to political prosperity (*Letter to F.L. Schaeffer*, Dec 3, 1821).
- Notwithstanding the general progress made within the two last centuries in favour of this branch of liberty, and the full establishment of it in some parts of our country, there remains in others a strong bias towards the old error, that without some sort of alliance or coalition between Government and Religion neither can be duly supported. Such, indeed, is the tendency to such a coalition, and such its corrupting influence on both the parties, that the danger cannot be too carefully guarded against. And in a Government of opinion like ours, the only effectual guard must be found in the soundness and stability of the general opinion on the subject. Every new and successful example, therefore, of a perfect separation between the ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance; and I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together. It was the belief of all sects at one time that the establishment of Religion by law was right and necessary; that the true religion ought to be established in exclusion of every other; and that the only question to be decided was, which was the true religion. The example of Holland proved that a toleration of sects dissenting from the established sect was safe, and even useful. The example of the colonies, now States, which rejected religious establishments altogether, proved that all sects might be safely and even advantageously put on a footing of equal and entire freedom; and a continuance of their example since the Declaration of Independence has shown that its success in Colonies was not to be ascribed to their connection with the parent country. if a further confirmation of the truth could be wanted, it is to be found in the examples furnished by the States which had abolished their religious establishments. I cannot speak particularly of any of the cases excepting that of Virginia, where it is impossible to deny that religion prevails with more zeal and a more exemplary priesthood than it ever did when established and patronized by public authority. We are teaching the world the great truth, that Governments do better without kings and nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson: the Religion flourishes in greater purity without, than with the aid of Government (*Letter to Edward Livingston*, July 10, 1822).
- If the Church of England had been the established and general religion and all the northern colonies as it has been among us here and uninterrupted tranquility had prevailed throughout the continent, it is clear to me that slavery and subjection might and would have been gradually insulated among us. Union of religious sentiments begets a surprising confidence and ecclesiastical establishments tend to grate ignorance and corruption all of which facilitate the execution of mischievous projects (*Letter to William Bradford*, Jan. 24, 1774).
- [T]he prevailing opinion in Europe, England not excepted, has been that religion could not be preserved without the support of government nor government be supported without an established religion that there must be at least an alliance of some sort between them. It remained for North America to bring the great and interesting subject to a fair, and finally a decisive test.

It is true that the New England states have not discontinued establishments of religions formed under very peculiar circumstances; but they have by successive relaxations advanced toward the prevailing example; and without any evidence of disadvantage either to religion or good government.

But the existing character, distinguished as it is by its religious features, and the lapse of time now more than 50 years since the legal support of religion was withdrawn sufficiently proved that it does not need the support of government and it will scarcely be contended that government has suffered by the exemption of religion from its cognizance, or its pecuniary aid. (*Letter to Rev. Jasper Adams*, Spring 1832).

- The settled opinion here is, that religion is essentially distinct from civil Government, and exempt from its cognizance; that a connection between them is injurious to both; that there are causes in the human breast which ensure the perpetuity of religion without the aid of the law; that rival sects, with equal rights, exercise mutual censorships in favor of good morals; that if new sects arise with absurd opinions or over-heated imaginations, the proper remedies lie in time, forbearance, and example; that a legal establishment of religion without a toleration could not be thought of, and with a toleration, is no security for and animosity; and, finally, that these opinions are supported by experience, which has shewn that every relaxation of the alliance between law and religion, from the partial example of Holland to the consummation in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, &c., has been found as safe in practice as it is sound in theory. Prior to the Revolution, the Episcopal Church was established by law in this State. On the Declaration of Independence it was left, with all other sects, to a self-support. And no doubt exists that there is much more of religion among us now than there ever was before the change, and particularly in the sect which enjoyed the legal patronage. This proves rather more than that the law is not necessary to the support of religion (*Letter to Edward Everett*, Montpelier, March 18, 1823).

On Congressional chaplains and proclamations of days of prayer:

- Is the appointment of Chaplains to the two Houses of Congress consistent with the Constitution, and with the pure principle of religious freedom? In the strictness the answer on both points must be in the negative. The Constitution of the U. S. forbids everything like an establishment of a national religion. The law appointing Chaplains establishes a religious worship for the national representatives, to be performed by Ministers of religion, elected by a majority of them; and these are to be paid out of the national taxes. Does not this involve the principle of a national establishment, applicable to a provision for a religious worship for the Constituent as well as of the representative Body, approved by the majority, and conducted by Ministers of religion paid by the entire nation?

The establishment of the chaplainship to Congs is a palpable violation of equal rights, as well as of Constitutional principles: The tenets of the chaplains elected [by the majority shut the door of worship agst the members whose creeds & consciences forbid a participation in that of the majority. To say nothing of other sects, this is the case with that of Roman Catholics & Quakers who have always had members in one or both of the Legislative branches. Could a Catholic clergyman ever hope to be appointed a Chaplain! To say that his religious principles are obnoxious or that his sect is small, is to lift the veil at once and exhibit in its naked deformity the doctrine that religious truth is to be tested by numbers or that the major sects have a right to govern the minor.

If Religion consist in voluntary acts of individuals, singly, or voluntarily associated, and it be proper that public functionaries, as well as their Constituents shd discharge their religious duties, let them like their Constituents, do so at their own expense. How small a contribution from each member of Cong wd suffice for the purpose! How just wd it be in its principle! How noble in its exemplary sacrifice to the genius of the Constitution; and the divine right of conscience! Why

should the expence of a religious worship be allowed for the Legislature, be paid by the public, more than that for the Ex. or Judiciary branch of the Gov. (*Detached Memoranda*, circa 1820).

- I observe with particular pleasure the view you have taken of the immunity of Religion from civil jurisdiction, in every case where it does not trespass on the private rights or the public peace. This has always been a favorite principle with me; and it was not with my approbation that the deviation from it took place in Congress, when they appointed chaplains, to be paid from the National Treasury. It would have been a much better proof to their constituents of their pious feeling if the members had contributed for the purpose a pittance from their own pockets. As the precedent is not likely to be rescinded, the best that can now be done may be to apply to the Constitution the maxim of the law, *de minimis non curat* [i.e., the law does not care about such trifles].

There has been another deviation from the strict principle in the Executive proclamations of fasts and festivals, so far, at least, as they have spoken the language of INJUNCTION, or have lost sight of the equality of ALL religious sects in the eye of the Constitution. Whilst I was honored with the executive trust, I found it necessary on more than one occasion to follow the example of predecessors. But I was always careful to make the Proclamations absolutely indiscriminate, and merely recommendatory; or rather mere DESIGNATIONS of a day on which all who thought proper might UNITE in consecrating it to religious purposes, according to their own faith and forms. In this sense, I presume, you reserve to the Government a right to APPOINT particular days for religious worship. I know not what may be the way of thinking on this subject in Louisiana. I should suppose the Catholic portion of the people, at least, as a small and even unpopular sect in the U. States would rally as they did in Virginia when religious liberty was a Legislative topic to its broadest principle (*Letter to Edward Livingston*, July 10, 1822).

Did Madison want the Bill of Rights to apply to the states?

- No state shall infringe the equal rights of conscience, nor the freedom of speech, or of the press, nor of the right of trial by jury in criminal cases [Proposed amendment to make certain parts of the Bill of Rights to apply to the states].

The Congressional Record of August 17, 1789 made the following comment on Madison's proposal:

- MR. MADISON Conceived this to be the most valuable amendment on the whole list; if there was any reason to restrain the government of the United States from infringing upon these essential rights, it was equally necessary that they should be secured against the state governments; he thought that if they provided against the one, it was an necessary to provide against the other, and was satisfied that it would be equally grateful to the people (from Alley, *James Madison on Religious Liberty*, pp. 75-76).

Madison's definition of "establishment":

One can get some idea of Madison's definition of establishment by looking at his veto messages for certain legislation presented to him by Congress during his presidency. Generally, Madison's definition was expansive; he vetoed legislation incorporating an Episcopal church in the District of Columbia, and reserving a parcel of land for a Baptist church. Read in context, these veto messages demolish the claim that Madison would have turned a blind eye to minor religious establishments.

- *Veto Message*, Feb 21, 1811 By James Madison, to the House of Representatives of the United States: Having examined and considered the bill entitled "An Act incorporating the Protestant Episcopal Church in the town of Alexander, in the District of Columbia," I now return the bill to the House of Representatives, in which it originated, with the following objections:

Because the bill exceeds the rightful authority to which governments are limited by the essential distinction between civil and religious functions, and violates in particular the article of the Constitution of the United States which declares 'Congress shall make no law respecting a religious establishment.' [Note: Madison quotes the Establishment Clause incorrectly; Constitutional scholar Leonard Levy comments on this misquoting as follows: "His [Madison's] use of "religious establishment" instead of "establishment of religion" shows that he thought of the clause in the First Amendment as prohibiting Congress from making any law touching or "respecting" religious institutions or religions; The Establishment Clause, p. 119].

The bill enacts into and establishes by law sundry rules and proceedings relative purely to the organization and policy of the church incorporated, and comprehending even the election and removal of the minister of the same, so that no change could be made therein by the particular society or by the general church of which it is a member, and whose authority it recognizes. This particular church, therefore, would so far be a religious establishment by law, a legal force and sanction being given to certain articles in its constitution and administration. Nor can it be considered that the articles thus established are to be taken as the descriptive criteria only of the corporate identity of the society, inasmuch as this identity must depend on other characteristics, as the regulations established are in general unessential and alterable according to the principles and canons by which churches of the denomination govern themselves, and as the injunctions and prohibitions contained in the regulations would be enforced by the penal consequences applicable to the violation of them according to the local law.

Because the bill vests in the said incorporated church an authority to provide for the support of the poor and the education of poor children of the same, an authority which, being altogether superfluous if the provision is to be the result of pious charity, would be a precedent for giving to religious societies as such a legal agency in carrying into effect a public and civil duty [Note: both of the last paragraphs suggest that Madison did not think it was the role of government to aid even the charitable and educational aspects of religion, even non-preferentially].

- *Veto message*, Feb 28, 1811, by James Madison. To the House of Representatives of the United States: Having examined and considered the bill entitled "An Act for the relief of Richard Trevin, William Coleman, Edwin Lewis, Samuel Mims, Joseph Wilson, and the Baptist Church at Salem Meeting House, in the Mississippi Territory," I now return the same to the House of Representatives, in which it originated, with the following objection:

Because the bill in reserving a certain parcel of land of the United States for the use of said Baptist Church comprises a principle and precedent for the appropriation of funds of the United States for the use and support of religious societies, contrary to the article of the Constitution which declares the 'Congress shall make no law respecting a religious establishment (*note: Madison again misquotes the establishment clause*).

Madison and religion at public universities:

- I am not surprised at the dilemma produced at your University by making theological professorships an integral part of the system. The anticipation of such a one led to the omission in ours; the visitors being merely authorized to open a public hall for religious occasions, under impartial regulations; with the opportunity to the different sects to establish theological schools so near that the students of the University may respectively attend the religious exercises in them. The village of Charlottesville, also, where different religious worships will be held, is also so near, that resort may conveniently be had to them.

A University with sectarian professorships becomes, of course, a sectarian monopoly: with professorships of rival sects, it would be an arena of Theological Gladiators. Without any such

professorships, it may incur, for a time at least, the imputation of irreligious tendencies, if not designs. The last difficulty was thought more manageable than either of the others.

On this view of the subject, there seems to be no alternative but between a public University without a theological professorship, and sectarian seminaries without a University.

...With such a public opinion, it may be expected that a University, with the feature peculiar to ours, will succeed here if any where. Some of the clergy did not fail to arraign the peculiarity; but it is not improbable that they had an eye to the chance of introducing their own creed into the professor's chair. A late resolution for establishing an Episcopal school within the College of William and Mary, though in a very guarded manner, drew immediate animadversions from the press, which, if they have not put an end to the project, are a proof of what would follow such an experiment in the University of the State, endowed and supported, as this will be altogether by the public authority and at the common expense (*Letter to Edward Everett*, Montpelier, March 18, 1823).

Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments

James Madison

[1785]

To the Honorable the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia

A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments

We the subscribers , citizens of the said Commonwealth, having taken into serious consideration, a Bill printed by order of the last Session of General Assembly, entitled "A Bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion," and conceiving that the same if finally armed with the sanctions of a law, will be a dangerous abuse of power, are bound as faithful members of a free State to remonstrate against it, and to declare the reasons by which we are determined. We remonstrate against the said Bill,

1. **Because** we hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, "that religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence." The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he

believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign. We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance. True it is, that no other rule exists, by which any question which may divide a Society, can be ultimately determined, but the will of the majority; but it is also true that the majority may trespass on the rights of the minority.

2. **Because** Religion be exempt from the authority of the Society at large, still less can it be subject to that of the Legislative Body. The latter are but the creatures and vicegerents of the former. Their jurisdiction is both derivative and limited: it is limited with regard to the co-ordinate departments, more necessarily is it limited with regard to the constituents. The preservation of a free Government requires not merely, that the metes and bounds which separate each department of power be invariably maintained; but more especially that neither of them be suffered to overleap the great Barrier which defends the rights of the people. The Rulers who are guilty of such an encroachment, exceed the commission from which they derive their authority, and are Tyrants. The People who submit to it are governed by laws made neither by themselves nor by an authority derived from them, and are slaves.

3. **Because** it is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties. We hold this prudent jealousy to be the first duty of Citizens, and one of the noblest characteristics of the late Revolution. The free men of America did not wait till usurped power had strengthened itself by exercise, and entangled the question in precedents. They saw all the consequences in the principle, and they avoided the consequences by denying the principle. We revere this lesson too much soon to forget it. Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? that the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?
4. **Because** the Bill violates the equality which ought to be the basis of every law, and which is more indispensable, in proportion as the validity or expediency of any law is more liable to be impeached. If "all men are by nature equally free and independent," all men are to be considered as entering into Society on equal conditions; as relinquishing no more, and therefore retaining no less, one than another, of their natural rights. Above all are they to be considered as retaining an "equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of Conscience." Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced

us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, not against man: To God, therefore, not to man, must an account of it be rendered. As the Bill violates equality by subjecting some to peculiar burdens, so it violates the same principle, by granting to others peculiar exemptions. Are the quakers and Menonists the only sects who think a compulsive support of their Religions unnecessary and unwarrantable? can their piety alone be entrusted with the care of public worship? Ought their Religions to be endowed above all others with extraordinary privileges by which proselytes may be enticed from all others? We think too favorably of the justice and good sense of these demoninations to believe that they either covet pre-eminences over their fellow citizens or that they will be seduced by them from the common opposition to the measure.

5. **Because** the Bill implies either that the Civil Magistrate is a competent Judge of Religious Truth; or that he may employ Religion as an engine of Civil policy. The first is an arrogant pretension falsified by the contradictory opinions of Rulers in all ages, and throughout the world: the second an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation.
6. **Because** the establishment proposed by the Bill is not requisite for the support of the Christian Religion. To say that it is, is a contradiction to the Christian Religion itself, for every page of it disavows a dependence on the powers of this world: it is a contradiction to fact; for it is known that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them, and not only during the

period of miraculous aid, but long after it had been left to its own evidence and the ordinary care of Providence. Nay, it is a contradiction in terms; for a Religion not invented by human policy, must have pre-existed and been supported, before it was established by human policy. It is moreover to weaken in those who profess this Religion a pious confidence in its innate excellence and the patronage of its Author; and to foster in those who still reject it, a suspicion that its friends are too conscious of its fallacies to trust it to its own merits.

7. **Because** experience witnesseth that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution. Enquire of the Teachers of Christianity for the ages in which it appeared in its greatest lustre; those of every sect, point to the ages prior to its incorporation with Civil policy. Propose a restoration of this primitive State in which its Teachers depended on the voluntary rewards of their flocks, many of them predict its downfall. On which Side ought their testimony to have greatest weight, when for or when against their interest?
8. **Because** the establishment in question is not necessary for the support of Civil Government. If it be urged as necessary for the support of Civil Government only as it is a means of supporting Religion, and it be not

necessary for the latter purpose, it cannot be necessary for the former. If Religion be not within the cognizance of Civil Government how can its legal establishment be necessary to Civil Government? What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on Civil Society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the Civil authority; in many instances they have been seen upholding the thrones of political tyranny: in no instance have they been seen the guardians of the liberties of the people. Rulers who wished to subvert the public liberty, may have found an established Clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just Government instituted to secure & perpetuate it needs them not. Such a Government will be best supported by protecting every Citizen in the enjoyment of his Religion with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property; by neither invading the equal rights of any Sect, nor suffering any Sect to invade those of another.

9. **Because** the proposed establishment is a departure from the generous policy, which, offering an Asylum to the persecuted and oppressed of every Nation and Religion, promised a lustre to our country, and an accession to the number of its citizens. What a melancholy mark is the Bill of sudden degeneracy? Instead of holding forth an Asylum to the persecuted, it is itself a signal of persecution. It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority. Distant as it may be in its present form from the Inquisition, it differs from it only in degree. The one is the first step, the other the last in the career of

intolerance. The magnanimous sufferer under this cruel scourge in foreign Regions, must view the Bill as a Beacon on our Coast, warning him to seek some other haven, where liberty and philanthropy in their due extent, may offer a more certain respose from his Troubles.

10. **Because** it will have a like tendency to banish our Citizens. The allurements presented by other situations are every day thinning their number. To superadd a fresh motive to emigration by revoking the liberty which they now enjoy, would be the same species of folly which has dishonoured and depopulated flourishing kingdoms

11. **Because** it will destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects. Torrents of blood have been split in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious disscord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy. Every relaxation of narrow and rigorous policy, wherever it has been tried, has been found to assauge the disease. The American Theatre has exhibited proofs that equal and compleat liberty, if it does not wholly eradicate it, sufficiently destroys its malignant influence on the health and prosperity of the State. If with the salutary effects of this system under our own eyes, we begin to contract the bounds of Religious freedom, we know no name that will too severely reproach our folly. At least let warning be taken at the first fruits of the threatened innovation. The very appearance of the Bill has transformed "that Christian forbearance, love and chairty," which of late mutually

prevailed, into animosities and jealousies, which may not soon be appeased. What mischiefs may not be dreaded, should this enemy to the public quiet be armed with the force of a law?

12. **Because** the policy of the Bill is adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity. The first wish of those who enjoy this precious gift ought to be that it may be imparted to the whole race of mankind. Compare the number of those who have as yet received it with the number still remaining under the dominion of false Religions; and how small is the former! Does the policy of the Bill tend to lessen the disproportion? No; it at once discourages those who are strangers to the light of revelation from coming into the Region of it; and countenances by example the nations who continue in darkness, in shutting out those who might convey it to them. Instead of Levelling as far as possible, every obstacle to the victorious progress of Truth, the Bill with an ignoble and unchristian timidity would circumscribe it with a wall of defence against the encroachments of error.

13. **Because** attempts to enforce by legal sanctions, acts obnoxious to go great a proportion of Citizens, tend to enervate the laws in general, and to slacken the bands of Society. If it be difficult to execute any law which is not generally deemed necessary or salutary, what must be the case, where it is deemed invalid and dangerous? And what may be the effect of so striking an example of impotency in the Government, on its general authority?

14. **Because** a measure of such singular magnitude and delicacy ought not to be imposed, without the clearest evidence that it is called for by a majority of

citizens, and no satisfactory method is yet proposed by which the voice of the majority in this case may be determined, or its influence secured. The people of the respective counties are indeed requested to signify their opinion respecting the adoption of the Bill to the next Session of Assembly." But the representatives or of the Counties will be that of the people. Our hope is that neither of the former will, after due consideration, espouse the dangerous principle of the Bill. Should the event disappoint us, it will still leave us in full confidence, that a fair appeal to the latter will reverse the sentence against our liberties.

15. **Because** finally, "the equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his Religion according to the dictates of conscience" is held by the same tenure with all our other rights. If we recur to its origin, it is equally the gift of nature; if we weigh its importance, it cannot be less dear to us; if we consult the "Declaration of those rights which pertain to the good people of Virginia, as the basis and foundation of Government," it is enumerated with equal solemnity, or rather studied emphasis. Either the, we must say, that the Will of the Legislature is the only measure of their authority; and that in the plenitude of this authority, they may sweep away all our fundamental rights; or, that they are bound to leave this particular right untouched and sacred: Either we must say, that they may controul the freedom of the press, may abolish the Trial by Jury, may swallow up the Executive and Judiciary Powers of the State; nay that they may despoil us of our very right of suffrage, and erect

themselves into an independent and hereditary Assembly or, we must say, that they have no authority to enact into the law the Bill under consideration.

We the Subscribers say, that the General Assembly of this Commonwealth have no such authority: And that no effort may be omitted on our part against so dangerous an usurpation, we oppose to it, this remonstrance; earnestly praying, as we are in duty bound, that the Supreme Lawgiver of the Universe, by illuminating those to whom it is addressed, may on the one hand, turn their Councils from every act which would affront his holy prerogative, or violate the trust committed to them: and on the other, guide them into every measure which may be worthy of his [blessing, may re]dound to their own praise, and may establish more firmly the liberties, the prosperity and the happiness of the Commonwealth.

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January 10, 2011

The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and

unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:
 For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:
 For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:
 For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:
 For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:
 For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:
 For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences
 For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:
 For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:
 For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.
 He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.
 He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.
 He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.
 He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.
 He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

The 56 signatures on the Declaration appear in the positions indicated:

Column 1

Georgia:

Button Gwinnett
 Lyman Hall
 George Walton

Column 2

North Carolina:

William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn

South Carolina:

Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton

Column 3**Massachusetts:**

John Hancock

Maryland:

Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton

Virginia:

George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton

Column 4**Pennsylvania:**

Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross

Delaware:

Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean

Column 5**New York:**

William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris

New Jersey:

Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark

Column 6**New Hampshire:**

Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple

Massachusetts:

Samuel Adams

John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island:

Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery

Connecticut:

Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott

New Hampshire:

Matthew Thornton

Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html

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The Virginia Act For Establishing Religious Freedom

Thomas Jefferson, 1786

Well aware that Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporal rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labors for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that, therefore, the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to the offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that

religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow citizens he has a natural right; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honors and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles, on the supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency, will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

And though we well know this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no powers equal to our own and that therefore to declare this act irrevocable would be of no effect in law, yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

Comment: Thomas Jefferson drafted *The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom* in 1779 three years after he wrote the *Declaration of Independence*. The act was not passed by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia until 1786. Jefferson was by then in Paris as the U.S. Ambassador to France. The Act was resisted by a group headed by Patrick Henry who sought to pass a bill that would have assessed all the citizens of Virginia to support a plural establishment. James Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* was, and remains, a powerful argument against state supported religion. It was written in 1785, just a few months before the General Assembly passed Jeff [Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments](#), are available on this site.

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Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

The Draft and Recently Discovered Text

To messers Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem & approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful & zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and, in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more & more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" thus building a wall of eternal separation between Church & State. Congress thus inhibited from acts respecting religion, and the Executive authorised only to execute their acts, I have refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion, practiced indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church, but subject here, as religious exercises only to the voluntary regulations and discipline of each respective sect,

[Jefferson first wrote: "*confining myself therefore to the duties of my station, which are merely temporal, be assured that your religious rights shall never be infringed by any act of mine and that.*" These lines he crossed out and then wrote: "*concurring with*"; having crossed out these two words, he wrote: "*Adhering to this great act of national legislation in behalf of the rights of conscience*"; next he crossed out these words and wrote: "*Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience I shall see with friendly dispositions the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced that he has no natural rights in opposition to his social duties.*"]

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & the Danbury Baptist [your religious] association assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson
Jan. 1. 1802.

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Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

The Final Letter, as Sent

To messers. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson
Jan. 1. 1802.

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