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John Adams and Unitarian Theology

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By

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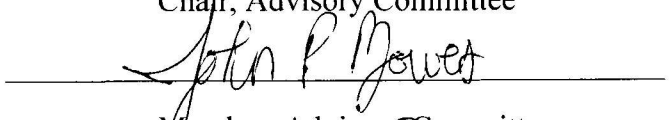

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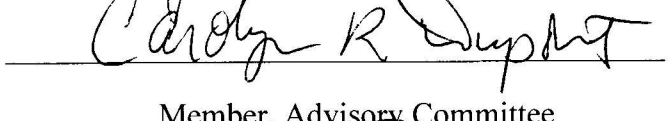

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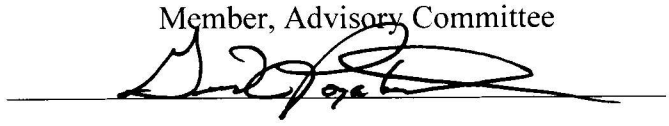

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JOHN ADAMS AND UNITARIAN THEOLOGY

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Bachelor of Arts
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2013

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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DEDICATION

To my parents, for their unwavering support. To my grandfather, for his inspiration. And to Elizabeth, for putting up with me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following professors, from Eastern Kentucky University, the University of Pikeville, and the University of Kentucky, for their excellent advice at different stages of this project: Dr. Brad Wood, Dr. John Bowes, Dr. Carolyn Dupont, Dr. Nancy Cade, Dr. Stephen Budney, Dr. James Browning, and Dr. David Olster. Thanks to Brandon Render for giving me feedback on a paper that became part of this thesis. Thanks to my fellow graduate students at EKU for the moral support and good times. Thanks to my family for their constant encouragement and support. And of course, thanks to Elizabeth for being the greatest person I know.

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the religious beliefs of John Adams and argues that the proper definition of Adams's belief system should only be "Unitarianism." It goes through the basic history of Unitarianism and the religious context of the Founding Fathers, and it analyzes relevant historiography on Adams's theological system, arguing against terms such as "Christian Deist" and "Theistic Rationalist." Then, the thesis suggests possible applications for Adams's religion, particularly when considering his emphasis on the ethical Jesus in relation to his desire for a moral society brought about by religion. Adams's theology can be applied to political actions he took during his life, including the drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, the signing of the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, and the issuing of national days of fasting and prayer during his presidency.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, scholars have written much about the Founding Fathers and their various roles in the American Revolution and early republic. Academics have composed copious analytical biographies of the Founders and thematic studies of the Founders' influence on the general Revolutionary era, with a sufficient quantity of scholarship in existence. But scholars have not studied all of the Founding Fathers in an equal fashion. Indeed, a survey of the literature will reveal that the vast amount of scholarship has tended to focus on such prominent figures in American history as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, but with less ample discussion and analysis of John Adams. Yet, Adams contributed much to the founding of the United States, arguably as much as anyone in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, therefore making the study of Adams worthwhile.[1]

Adams played a prodigious role in the founding of the United States and the early period of the nation as a republic. Born in Massachusetts, he was one of the first true American patriots, calling for independence from Great Britain early on in the national debate on the issue. He was a member of the First and Second Continental Congresses in the mid-1770s as a stalwart defender of liberty, political independence, and republicanism and the rule of law; Adams believed in the rule of law so much that as a lawyer he even defended British soldiers after the Boston Massacre in 1770. Adams was

[1] I have essentially been developing this master's thesis since my senior year of college at the University of Pikeville, and I would like to point out that an earlier version of much of the following was presented at the Kentucky Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference in the spring of 2014 at Eastern Kentucky University. Then the paper was known as "John Adams, Unitarianism, and Church-State Relations."

an integral part of the committee that developed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, along with Thomas Jefferson, who was the main author of the document. He served overseas in various diplomatic roles, including in France during the peace negotiations for the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the Revolutionary War, and he was the first official minister to Great Britain after the United States had achieved independence. Adams also became the first vice president of the United States in 1789, serving under President George Washington for two terms until 1797, when he became the second president of the United States. Certainly the fact that Adams was the second president warrants more scholarship on him, particularly concerning religion, his personal theology, and possible applications of his religious beliefs.[2]

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[2] Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 175-77; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 467. The sketch of Adams in *Revolutionary Characters* is probably the best short analysis of the overall character and political career of Adams available, and the original version of it is also available in Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969). In both books, the chapter is known as "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams." For the best full biography in the narrative style, see the aforementioned work by David McCullough. Another excellent full biography that is more scholarly in tone, though it is still aimed at popular audiences, is John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The best comprehensive analysis of Adams's political thought is C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998). A valuable and succinct biography of Adams that focuses on his presidency can be found in the American Presidents series edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams* (New York: Times Books, 2003). A fine character study of Adams is Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001). And another good, though less essential, well-written modern biography of Adams is James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). Furthermore, a great recent master's thesis that analyzes the Adams-Jefferson letters is Blakely K. Hume, "He who loves the Workman and his Work improves It: The Religion of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson" (M. A. thesis, University of Nevada, Reno, 2013). And a significant collection of essays on John and John Quincy Adams is David Waldstreicher, ed., *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). In particular, John Fea has a stellar essay in this collection entitled "John Adams and Religion." For some excellent primary sources on Adams to refer to in general, works that will give the scholar a superb impression of the mind of John Adams, see the following: Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Bruce Braden, ed., *"Ye Will Say I Am No Christian": The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2006); John Patrick Diggins, ed., *The Portable John Adams* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

When one looks through the colossal quantity of scholarship on the time period, one discovers that, when it comes to the individual religious views of the Revolutionary generation, scholars have especially tended to focus on Founders other than John Adams; notably, scholars have focused on Thomas Jefferson and his intricate theology.[3] The theological convictions of Adams, however, deserve to be investigated, as they are not as obvious as they might seem when taken out of context. And in particular, how his theology related to his complex viewpoints on the idea of a separation of church and state is also worth investigating. In order to look at his religious views, it will be necessary to analyze his writings, actions, and what other historians and scholars have said about him. And in order to properly look at Adams's stance on such an issue, this question must be asked and analyzed: how does Unitarianism relate to the concept of a separation of church and state in the context of John Adams and his views on proper church-state relations? This will be analyzed more in the last chapter on the possible applications of Adams's theology and how it affected some of the political decisions in his career.

The main argument of this thesis will be for the proper definition of the religion of John Adams. I will argue that the only correct term to describe the overall theological belief system of John Adams would be Unitarianism. Not all scholars agree on the most correct term to use for Adams's religion, but the precise term one should use to describe

[3] Indeed, a prime example of the fact that scholars have understudied Adams's religion is found in the excellent primary-source collection, James H. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005). On page 235, Hutson has a nice, short bibliographic essay for suggested reading on different Founders and works that exist on them concerning their particular religious perspectives. Here one will find examples of works that deal with the theologies of Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Madison, and even Hamilton, but one will not find the name of John Adams. This is probably because Hutson did not have many options to choose from, or perhaps it is because Hutson forgot to include a work on Adams. Either way, a well-known work that focuses mostly on John Adams and religion evidently does not exist, or at least one of the top scholars on the subject of religion and the Founding Fathers does not know about its existence.

Adams's theological system of thought is not immediately apparent after reading some of his writings unless one does some interpretative work.

The ba*sic* layout of this thesis will be as follows. The first chapter will explore the relevant historical background relating to the thesis, with particular attention given to the pertinent history of Unitarianism. The second chapter will focus on some general historiography relating to the Founding Fathers and religion, as well as to John Adams and religion specifically. This chapter will also discuss some alternate terms that some scholars have given to Adams's religious belief system, but I will argue against those terms – especially "Christian Deist" or "Deistic Christian." The third chapter will present and analyze the religious beliefs of John Adams as evident from his writings, and the chapter will also argue for the validity of calling Adams a Unitarian, which is the only appropriate term one can use. Finally, the fourth chapter will look at Adams's Unitarianism and its relationship to church-state relations, concentrating on his role in the formation of the Massachusetts state constitution, the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, and his national proclamations of fasting and thanksgiving while president of the United States during the Quasi-War with France.

In order to investigate the above topics, chiefly the religious beliefs of John Adams, we must analyze and evaluate certain themes. After examining the historical background of Unitarianism, we must examine the Puritan/Calvinist background of New England, as John Adams was born into this culture/society and was undoubtedly influenced by it. This examination of Puritan/Calvinist themes is absolutely essential for the scholar to contemplate and understand; without this awareness, the scholar cannot know Adams in his proper context. Next, we will look at another cultural phenomenon of

Adams's life, one that influenced him in different ways after being brought up in a previously Puritan/Calvinist society: we will look at the Enlightenment and the philosophy behind it, in order to see how Adams and indeed his colleagues formed some of their opinions, based on Enlightenment thinking. Additionally, we will briefly discuss some general religious opinions of the Founders overall, which mostly stemmed from Enlightenment thinking, and are important to look at in relation to Adams. And by examining the overall theological views of the Founding Fathers, Adams can be put into proper context along with his colleagues. This, then, will lead us to the personal theology of Adams, Unitarianism. Unitarianism was complicated and, perhaps surprisingly, quite varied during the lifetime of Adams, so a relatively detailed description and analysis of Unitarianism as a whole and Adams's personal religious standpoints will be necessary. And of course, it will be crucial to relate all of this back to the aforementioned basic history of Unitarianism. Finally, we will need to analyze significant writings and actions during Adams's life which prove that he can only be called a Unitarian. This will, in addition, correlate with issues concerning church-state relations, particularly actions during his presidency, and will demonstrate the complex views of Adams on the subject. The fundamental argument for this last section will be that, beyond Adams's rejection of traditions of Calvinism/Puritanism and the influences of the Enlightenment in a broader sense, certain elements of Unitarianism that are specific to Unitarianism, such as the emphasis on the ethics of Jesus vs. his divinity, influenced Adams on how he wanted the role of religion to be in society. Adams wanted a general public religion that would help

to make American citizens more moral and peaceful, and Unitarianism can be correlated with political actions during Adams's life to show this.[4]

Before delving into more detailed matters, we will first need to define certain terms that will be used, as these terms have different meanings to different people. Puritanism and the Enlightenment will be defined in more detail later on in the thesis, but for now, it will suffice to know that by "Puritanism" in the context of this thesis, I mean the basic concept of a virtuous, moral society made up of religious people with strong work ethics influenced by Calvinism: basically, I mean a "Puritan tradition." By "the Enlightenment" I mean the liberal rejection of evangelical religion based on faith alone, and the belief in the rationality of the human mind, using science and philosophy to come to convictions, not faith in the supernatural. When I use the terms "liberal" and "conservative" on the spectrum of religious thought, I consider "liberalism" to be a perspective that goes against tradition and orthodoxy to some degree at least, and I consider "conservativism" to be a viewpoint that promotes tradition and orthodoxy. Also, by "liberal" I of course mean this rejection of exclusively faith-based religion as well, and by "faith" I mean "belief without tangible evidence."[5]

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[4] This last argument, while being important, is more suggestive than definitive. I do not argue that Unitarianism was the only element that historians should analyze when it comes to John Adams and church-state relations. I am merely proposing that this is a fairly new way of looking at the subject that scholars have not emphasized before, as they tend to focus on Calvinism and the religious culture of New England vs. the influences of Enlightenment philosophy. My main intention with this section is to, hopefully, influence other scholars to do further research.

[5] Even though I contrast faith with rational thought in this thesis, that does not mean that I am taking those words in a literal sense. In other words, I am trying not to bring my personal biases into this thesis, as modern debates in public intellectual circles, notably among famous "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins, tend to focus on the idea that you cannot be rational while holding to a belief system based on religious faith over scientific evidence. However, I do contrast faith and rationality/reason in the context of what Enlightenment-era thinkers argued. John Adams would have been among these thinkers, and he certainly contrasted faith and "superstition" with scientific reasoning and common sense.

In addition, when I mention the Founding Fathers or the Founders, I am talking about the most elite white men from the time. These men include, principally, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and of course, John Adams. Furthermore, when I use "Unitarianism," I am fundamentally talking about the repudiation of the concept of the Trinity in mainline Christianity, and the refusal to accept that Jesus was God. But Unitarians did identify themselves in the Christian tradition, and they emphasized the ethical teachings of Jesus over, for example, passages in the Bible that advanced the notion that Jesus was divine to the point of being the same as God.[6] The precise definition of Unitarianism is much more complicated than that, but for our purposes now, it is sufficient to understand this simple description, as we will get into a more detailed discussion later. And the idea of a separation between church and state also needs to be defined. In essence, for our purposes it is the idea that the federal government should not endorse a particular religion or interfere with religion on the individual state level. Adams's complicated views on this concept will, of course, be discussed and analyzed, especially when he was president of the United States.

[6] Indeed, one could argue for the position that Unitarians and Muslims have much in common. It is true that Islam teaches Muslims to give much respect toward Jesus and to view him as a prophet of God, just not the same as God, which sounds similar to Unitarianism. Since this is a thesis in the discipline of history and not a thesis strictly in theology, I will not argue for the validity of seeing Unitarianism and Islam in the same theological spectrum. I will, however, say that Unitarians would view themselves in a religious tradition that ends with Jesus and does not continue with Muhammad, which distinguishes them from Muslims. Furthermore, Unitarianism and Judaism share similarities in theology, since Unitarians focus on one Abrahamic deity instead of the Trinity. But Jews do not emphasize Jesus as much as Unitarians do, so it is still proper to place Unitarians under the category of "liberal Christianity" from a historical perspective, since that is the way that Unitarians would have identified themselves. Once again, this thesis cannot cover the theological soundness of Unitarian theology. Also, modern Unitarian-Universalists recognize that their general religion has Christian roots even though modern Unitarian-Universalism has little to do with Christianity, as essentially anyone from any or no religious background can be a Unitarian-Universalist.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding the pertinent history of what can broadly be called Unitarianism is important to understanding John Adams and his religious belief system. Though there are many events and themes that could be discussed, only a few will be necessary for the purposes of this thesis. Probably the most important aspect of Unitarianism's history that needs to be understood dates back to internal debates within early Christianity.

Unitarianism's history can be traced back, indirectly, to theological debates that occurred in the fourth century. Unitarians "asserted that they had restored the original Christian belief that Jesus was in some way commissioned or sent by God but that he remained subordinate to him."[7] Arius of Alexandria, the famous early leader of the doctrine of Christian subordinationism, also believed in the elemental principles of the "Jesus from below" school of thought, and Adams was undoubtedly influenced by him. Arius was a Christian presbyter in the third and fourth centuries, and he instructed people in the belief that Jesus was inherently a "super-angelic being whom God had created out of nothing." Jesus was "immensely superior to humans, but he was subordinate to God." And for a while, "a majority of Christian clergy and laity believed similarly" in these theological positions.[8]

An opponent of Arius named Athanasius, who was the bishop of Alexandria, led a movement that essentially defeated the idea of subordination by developing the precepts

[7] David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.

[8] Ibid., 74.

of Trinitarianism. Two main church councils in the fourth century produced what would later be known as the Nicene Creed; these councils occurred at Nicea in 325 and at Constantinople in 381. Even though the exact origin of what is commonly known as the Nicene Creed is not fully understood, the councils at Nicea and Constantinople in their respective years were the main events in the amalgamation of the vital tenets of the Creed. Indeed, the Nicene Creed became a major part of orthodox Christianity by the fifth century, and versions of it are still recited today. During the time of the Revolutionary generation, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer had this version of the Creed:

> I BELIEVE . . . in One Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. . . . And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. . . .[9]

Also developed during this same general time was what would be known as the Athanasian Creed. This creed discussed similar topics and defined the Trinity as: "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God."[10] These creeds were, and are, extraordinarily important to orthodox Christians, what some would call "mainstream" Christians, for many reasons: "It gave authority to the words of Jesus. It taught that the Son of God, and not simply a demigod, died on the cross for the sins of humanity. It placed the continual intercession for

[9] Quoted in Ibid., 75.

[10] Ibid.

humanity at the right hand of God in the hands of the Son of God, and not in those of a chief angel (who, like Satan, could always defect)."[11] These beliefs were not terribly important to John Adams, however. Of course, Adams rejected the thought process behind Trinitarian doctrine, so consequently he rejected the primary axioms of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, which did not make him an orthodox Christian, then or today.[12]

A point that cannot be emphasized enough is the fact that the predominant contention of Unitarianism was the concept of the Abrahamic God being only one entity, contrary to Trinitarian Christianity that divided God into the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: "The Unitarians taught the oneness of God. . . ."[13] However, Unitarians also rejected other orthodox Christian doctrines. Reason, via the process of viewing and thinking about the world in a scientific, more objective fashion, not faith that was based on simply accepting the teachings of scripture without further inquiry, was the central way of determining religious truth -- and really any other kind of truth. This was a genuine humanistic principle that remains a significant principle in Unitarianism and other liberal religious traditions to this day. Additionally, the whole idea of the infallibility of the Bible was shunned, along with "human depravity and the inheritance of

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 74-5.

[13] Julia Corbett Hemeyer, *Religion in America* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 230. I should also point out here that Trinitarians argue that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are all manifestations of the same deity, therefore making orthodox Christianity a monotheistic religion when ostensibly it can look like a polytheistic religion. But, in general, Unitarians by definition do not accept this line of thinking and argue that this goes against scientific reason and common sense. To Unitarians, only their theology truly includes a monotheistic Christian deity.

original sin, and the doctrine that some will be damned eternally."[14] This renouncement of the doctrine of eternal damnation was analogous to Universalism, which was a religion that believed in the eventual universal salvation of humans by God, repudiating the notion of the "elect" that were the only ones to be saved. Universalism existed even in the early American colonies, though it was never common, and it would later be combined with Unitarianism in the twentieth century to form the modern-day Unitarian-Universalism religion that is not exclusively oriented to Christianity.[15]

Unitarianism, or at the very least what could be called proto-Unitarianism since it did not have a significant organizational structure yet, really started to take off in the United States in the late eighteenth century: "The first church in the United States that took an explicitly Unitarian view of God did so in the late 1700s."[16] An Episcopal church in Boston, King's Chapel, appointed James Freeman as a minister in 1785, and he had Unitarian convictions. While minister, Freeman changed the Anglican Prayer Book used by his congregation by removing any reference to the Holy Trinity and other Trinitarian doctrines, which subsequently led to the official Episcopal Church refusing to recognize King's Chapel as Episcopalian. Nevertheless, Freeman's church ultimately became officially Unitarian, and in 1787, Freeman became the first ordained Unitarian minister in America: "What had been the first Episcopal Church in Boston became the first Unitarian Church."[17]

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 229-33.

[16] Ibid., 230.

[17] Ibid., 230-1.

In the United States, Unitarianism developed from the liberal wing of Congregationalism, particularly in New England, and would eventually become focused on political justice and social justice. Congregationalism had been the most dominant Christian denomination in the colonial period of American history, but it began to decline after the Revolutionary period; part of the decline was a result of the popular rise of revivalist evangelism, which, in many cases, ironically came from certain sects of Congregationalism. Businessmen, merchants, and other professionals were attracted to Unitarianism, precisely because Trinitarian theology and Calvinism were not followed. Unitarianism's emphasis on logic, reason, freedom, rationality, and intellectualism greatly appealed to these classes of Americans, as they too discarded strict religious principles like God's supposed mysterious ways and original sin, and sin in general. They also held that religious revivals and "awakenings" that were happening in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century were not rational. Transcendentalism, which gave prominence to self-knowledge and the idea that a small part of the larger divine existed in every human, and made famous by Ralph Waldo Emerson, also emerged from these movements later.[18]

[18] Justo L Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Volume II: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 320-1.; Richard E. Wentz, *American Religious Traditions: The Shaping of Religion in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 97-8, 332. Also, for what is still the standard account of the early history of Unitarianism in America, see Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).

CHAPTER III

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND TERMINOLOGY CONCERNING THE RELIGION OF JOHN ADAMS

Now it is crucial to discuss the general historiography relating to the issues at hand. For the most part, the relevant secondary sources for this paper are books that discuss the religious views of the Founding Fathers as a whole group. In these works on the Founders, John Adams is indeed mentioned, and often, an entire chapter is devoted to him. The scholarship, though, is still mainly focused on figures such as Jefferson, Franklin, and Washington, which is a pity because Adams's religious views are quite intriguing and unique.[19] Nevertheless, the study of Adams is important -- certainly for his contributions to the founding era of the United States -- and since not as much scholarship has been written about Adams, this thesis can only add to the growing understanding of the man.

One integral book in the historiography on Adams, the Founding Fathers, and religion in early America, is by Edwin S. Gaustad: *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826.* This book looks at the development of the "religious life of the nation from the time of the Revolution to the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams." It is significant for the purposes of investigating the philosophies of Founders such as Adams in relation to cultural elements, such as the Enlightenment. Gaustad uses

[19] I suspect that the reason scholars have always tended to focus on other Founders is because others seem to be more well-known among the general population; and of course, Adams's presidency was in-between Washington and Jefferson, both two-term presidents who are historically remembered for "great" accomplishments. Indeed, Adams is not on Mount Rushmore.

political and intellectual/cultural history to analyze the complexities of viewpoints on church-state relations throughout this period in American history to come to the conclusion that, contrary to what those on the left or right say, there was no "uniformity" of opinion among the Founders.[20]

Another essential secondary source is David L. Holmes's *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers.* This is a significant modern work on the religious views of the major Founding Fathers, including Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and Franklin. Of course, for the purposes of this paper, the section on the Unitarian beliefs of Adams is of great interest and is very useful. Holmes's basic thesis is that all of the major Founders can be categorized into one general category: Unitarianism and Deism, though with different particular beliefs among each individual Founder. Holmes looks at the Founders' theological beliefs by looking at their writings and actions over their lifetimes to come to this conclusion. He states that if one were to create broad categories for the theology of the Revolutionary era, such as "Atheism, Deism and Unitarianism, Orthodox Protestantism, Orthodox Roman Catholicism, and Other," the main Founders would all be under "Deism and Unitarianism" in some form. For instance, he refers to Adams both as a Unitarian and as a "Christian Deist." To me, however, "Christian Deist" is a problematic label, which is an issue that must be discussed further.[21]

David Holmes has tried to describe Adams as a "Christian Deist" as well as a Unitarian.[22] Holmes defines what he means by "Christian Deist" as someone who follows

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[20] Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004), 1-139.

[21] David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-185.

[22] Ibid., 73-8.

a rational, liberal religion, rejecting such doctrines as the Trinity, predestination, and human depravity, while also still seriously respecting and following Jesus Christ in an ethical and philosophical way, not in a strictly theological way. This definition is interesting, because Holmes also describes Adams as a Unitarian while calling him a Christian Deist at the same time.[23] This dichotomy is not necessary, I argue, because "Christian Deist" is a contradiction in terms. I define Deism as a belief in a creator-deity who formed the world and universe and then left it alone, one who is not the Abrahamic deity of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. By their basic definitions, Deism and Christianity should not go together, as they directly contradict each other.

It is true that the above definition of Deism is not the only definition for "Deism" in the Enlightenment, but to me it is the most appropriate description. It is broad enough to cover the majority of Deists at the time, and it does not leave room for ambiguity like the term "Christian Deist" does. To avoid confusion, scholars should be more exclusive when they use these terms, which would be more historically accurate as well.

Assuredly nobody then or now would refer to themselves as being both a Christian and a Deist at the same time. Christians would have had a similar understanding to the definition of Deism as the one described above, and Deists would have comprehended the basic beliefs of traditional Christianity, as they most likely would have had detailed opinions on the question of why they did not accept standard Christian theology. John Adams in particular would not have described himself as a Deist in any sense, and in fact he argued against actual admitted Deists such as Thomas Paine.[24] He

[23] Ibid.

[24] It would not be incorrect to say that Adams detested much of what Paine espoused. This will be analyzed more later.

was proud to call himself a real, true Christian, one who could see through the historical corruptions of Christianity that from his perspective had plagued the religion over the years. In essence, Adams thought of himself as a Christian in the sense of what Jesus wanted a Christian to be, which would not have been anything close to what a non-Christian Deist would have been.

Furthermore, Adams believed in a Christian God who intervened in human affairs, and he indeed called himself a Unitarian in a letter to his son later in his life, for example: "We Unitarians, one of whom I have had the Honour to be, for more than sixty Years . . . ."[25] Therefore, to call Adams any kind of a Deist is to do a disservice to him, as he considered himself to be a Christian, although a different one from most people who call themselves Christian: "My religion you know is not exactly conformable to that of the greatest part of the Christian World. It excludes superstition. But with all the superstition that attends it, I think the Christian the best that is or has been."[26] Frankly it is wrong to describe Adams as anything other than a Unitarian, albeit one who had

[25] James H. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 220-21; "From John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 28 March 1816," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3058 [last update: 2015-02-20]). Perhaps Adams was being anachronistic here in his exact terminology, but the fact remains that he wanted to present an identity of himself as having been a Unitarian for the great majority of his life. Interestingly, a recent master's thesis on the religion of Adams and Jefferson states this in the conclusion: "Neither man acknowledged that he was a Unitarian, Theist, or Deist, or Atheist." That conclusion is plainly contradicted by the above quotation where Adams explicitly claims to be a Unitarian and to have been one for most of his life. The thesis is excellent otherwise. See Blakely K. Hume, "He who loves the Workman and his Work improves It: The Religion of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson" (M. A. thesis, University of Nevada, Reno, 2013), 95.

[26] Hutson, *The Founders on Religion*, 56; "From John Adams to Abigail Smith Adams, 28 January 1799," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0322 [last update: 2015-02-20]).

complex ideas on God, morality, and on such doctrines as the proper relationship between church and government.[27]

However, there is one scholar who has gone beyond Holmes by referring to Adams as a straightforward Deist at one point: "In private he was a thoroughgoing deist; in public he strove to appear an orthodox Christian, even going so far as to issue fast day proclamations that embodied the trinitarian conception of God."[28] John West does not, to my mind, do a great job with backing up his assertion that Adams was a Deist in his private life, and he does not talk about Unitarianism much. While his book is worth reading and is important, his discussions of Adams's religion are lacking in their sophistication, as he does not take a substantial amount of time to talk much about Unitarianism. That is to be lamented because his work is intriguing otherwise.[29]

Going beyond "Christian Deist," "Deistic Christian," and "Deist," an additional scholar has recently argued for using a unique term concerning the religion of John Adams and the overall religion of the Founding Fathers. Gregg Frazer uses "theistic rationalism" in his excellent *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders* book, where he

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[27] In another work, Holmes does say that Adams eventually became a "conservative" Unitarian, but he does not go into detail with what he means by "conservative" Unitarian. Since this is not one of Holmes's major works, it is not worth discussing more than the discussion here in this footnote. See David L. Holmes, "The Founding Fathers, Deism, and Christianity," in *The Founding Fathers: The Essential Guide to the Men Who Made America* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 184.

[28] John G. West, Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 49. More on the national proclamations for fasting and prayer later.

[29] Also see Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, eds., *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Particularly, see Darren Staloff's "Deism and the Founders" essay in the book, especially page 25, where there is an exceptional analysis of Adams's religion, and page 26, where Staloff states: "Among all the A-list founders, only Benjamin Franklin can be described as a Deist without qualification or cavil."

argues for a systematic definition of the religion of the Founders.[30] Frazer contends that theistic rationalism "was a hybrid belief system mixing elements of natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism, with rationalism as the predominant element."[31] Frazer further states that only the "well-educated elite" or "those versed in Enlightenment thought" would have supported such a system, since "natural religion and rationalism were critical components."[32] In other words, here Frazer is saying that this style of religious philosophy would not have appealed to the great masses of Americans, as it required the education and financial ability of the upper classes to be able to conceptualize the world in such a way. Indubitably John Adams would have been a part of this elite group, and most of the major Founders would have been, too.

Followers "of theistic rationalism believed that these three elements [natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism] would generally complement one another; but when conflict between them could not be resolved or ignored, reason had to play the decisive role."[33] This is one of the main reasons why Frazer feels comfortable with placing all of the major Founding Fathers under the same theological label of theistic rationalism: the Founders used Enlightenment thought to come to many of their religious opinions, when evangelical Christianity would have mostly required them to forsake

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[30] Gregg L. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

[31] Ibid., 14.

[32] Ibid. Frazer uses similar definitions for "rationalism" and "Christianity" to the ones I have used in this thesis. He defines "natural religion" as "a system of thought centered on the belief that reliable information about God and about what He wills is best discovered and understood by examining the evidence of nature and the laws of nature, which He established." This philosophy is directly related to Deism as well, though it is not exclusively related to Deism. See Ibid., 15.

[33] Ibid., 14.

reasoned thought for the truths revealed through divine revelation, holy scripture, and faith in God. So it makes sense on one hand for Frazer to define the general religion of the Founding generation as theistic rationalism. On the other hand, the Founders would have never used this terminology in their lifetimes, and at least they started to use "Unitarian" later in their lives, so that term is not completely anachronistic. But does this style of terminology that Frazer uses make the study of the religion of the Founding Fathers more difficult? I would argue that the answer is yes, simply because "theistic rationalism" reveals to the scholar a system of thought that the Founders would have never put themselves into; the modern historian does not let the historical actors speak for themselves, essentially. And in the case of John Adams, he would have never called himself a theistic rationalist in the manner in which Gregg Frazer calls him. Adams would have called himself a true Christian, and later in his life he would have indeed called himself a Unitarian.[34]

Another fundamental general work is Frank Lambert's *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America.* This work is significant to this thesis because it investigates questions related to how America came to be a nation that had a separation of church and state. Particularly, this book has a good discussion on the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797 and its famous Article 11, which stated that "the government of the United States" was "not in any sense founded on" Christianity. Lambert uses political and intellectual/cultural analysis to argue that "in deciding the place of religion in the new

[34] This is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this thesis.

republic, the Founding Fathers, rather than designing a church-state framework of their own, endorsed the emerging free marketplace of religion."[35]

David Sehat's *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* is also an indispensable modern work when considering religion during the time of the Founding Fathers. This book discusses the religious history of the United States, and it finds a middle ground between modern "conservatives," who think this is/was a completely Christian nation, and modern "liberals," who think this is/was a completely secular nation. Sehat looks at political history to come to the conclusion that, for much of American history, Protestant Christianity has been dominant, even in church-state relations. Therefore, true religious freedom has not always been in place in America. Sections on Adams and his approval of a public support of religion for moral reasons are invaluable.[36]

Furthermore, C. Bradley Thompson's *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* is an important work for the purposes of this thesis. This book focuses on Adams instead of the Founders in general, and it is a significant, comprehensive study of Adam's political thought. The chapter on "Calvin, Locke, and the American Enlightenment" is of particular importance to the paper, as Thompson uses cultural and intellectual analysis to determine that on issues such as religion's relationship to public affairs, Adams was influenced by the Enlightenment, not just his Puritan/Calvinist cultural upbringing.[37]

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[35] Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1-296.

[36] David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-291.

[37] C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 3-23.

Additionally, the principal primary source collection I have used is a book edited by James H. Hutson entitled: *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations*. This is an excellent collection of the Founding Fathers' quotes on various religions topics, and it is organized very well. Other than the excellent online database from the National Archives, Founders.Archives.gov, Hutson's collection is the most useful source on the subject of religion and the Founders. This book is significant to this thesis because Adams's quotes on different religious themes are easily attainable, and it seems to be a reliable source. Indeed, I have compared the quotations found in Hutson's collection to the longer letters and writings found in other collections, and Hutson does not, from what I can gather, take any quotations out of context, which is the sign of a true scholar who does not have an ulterior motive or political agenda to promote. Of course, this book is not the only source for quotes by Adams, though it is in my mind the most outstanding collection of primary-source quotations from the Founders on religion that I have come across in my research.[38]

Now, we must turn to a more general historiography of the topics at hand. Broadly, there are two general groups of scholars that have looked at how Adams developed his opinions on the relationship between church and state. One group, which includes such eminent American Revolution scholars as Bernard Bailyn and Edmund S. Morgan, focuses on the Puritan/Calvinist cultural upbringing of Adams in New England, specifically in Massachusetts. These scholars analyze the mind of Adams, in an almost psychohistory sort of fashion, and in particular, the struggles against his inward self. Scholars that emphasize these factors point to the fact that Puritans supported the idea of

[38] James H. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

a union between church and state, especially for moral reasons, which undoubtedly affected John Adams throughout his life on issues relating to church and state and their connection.[39]

Another group of more modern scholars recognizes this Puritan cultural influence, but also emphasizes the Enlightenment and how it affected Adams's views. The most significant scholar to focus on the Enlightenment is C. Bradley Thompson, who, as already mentioned, wrote an important and comprehensive monograph on Adams entitled *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*. Thompson focuses on how basic tenets of the Enlightenment influenced Adams, along with his Puritan background.[40]

These two schools of thought, however, do not discuss the personal theological views of Adams to the degree that they should be discussed. I later argue that, along with Puritanism and the Enlightenment, Unitarianism also contributed to Adams's political views, including his position on proper church and state relations. Unitarianism of course came out of Enlightenment thought in many respects, but not everyone who adhered to Enlightenment philosophy would have been a Unitarian. Adams's views on the topic were, of course, quite complex, so it is necessary to grasp a few basic themes that will lead us to Unitarianism and church-state relations.

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[39] Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 3-23. Also, see Bernard Bailyn, "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch," *William and Mary Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Apr., 1962): 238-256. And see Edmund S. Morgan, "John Adams and the Puritan Tradition," *The New England Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Dec., 1961): 518-529**.**

[40] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF JOHN ADAMS

First, it is essential that we examine Adams's Puritan and Calvinist societal background and cultural upbringing. By doing this, we can begin to understand some cultural themes that indubitably influenced Adams later in his life, even if, as will be shown, he rejected much of this upbringing. After understanding certain aspects of New England culture in the eighteenth century, and even into the early nineteenth century, then we can move on to Enlightenment philosophy that dismissed a great deal of the tradition of Puritanism and Calvinism. And of course, by understanding both of these aspects of Adams's life, we can better understand how Unitarianism came to influence him, specifically on church-state relations.

The tradition of Puritanism, which was greatly influenced by Calvinism, was important in New England during Adams's lifetime, especially in his home colony of Massachusetts. Without question, this cultural and societal background affected the thought and beliefs of Adams, both internally and externally. In essence, Adams grew up in a society that emphasized the depravity of human nature, the idea that you could not save yourself through your own actions, and the concept of predestination; simply, God was the only source of salvation, and you had to have faith that you were saved, as that was all you could do. And in fact, Puritans supported the idea of a union between church and state for moral reasons, as mentioned above -- civil society would be better off with a

religious people -- which, without question, influenced Adams throughout his life on the issue of church and the state.[41]

Adams would eventually abandon many of the major tenets of Puritanism and Calvinism, however: "I must be a very unnatural Son to entertain any prejudices against Calvinists or Calvinism. . . . Indeed I have never known any better people than the Calvinists. Nevertheless I must acknowledge that I can not class myself under that denomination. My opinions indeed on religious subjects ought not to be of any consequence to any but myself."[42] Adams just could not accept many Calvinist doctrines, particularly the Calvinist disavowal of free will and the importance of performing good works in one's life.[43] In addition, Adams was "repulsed by the fundamental Protestant doctrine that salvation was determined by only faith -- acceptance of Christ as personal savior -- rather than deeds. This doctrine was 'detestable,' 'invidious,' and 'hurtful' -- and would 'discourage the practice of virtue.'"[44] He believed that Christianity should be focused on the creation of "good men, good [magistrates] and good Subjects, Good husbands and good Wives, good Parents an good children, good masters and good servants" instead of making "good Riddle Solvers or good mystery mongers."[45] Why did

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[41] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers,* 12-3.

[42] Hutson, *The Founders on Religion,* 38; "From John Adams to Samuel Miller, 7 July 1820," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7369 [last update: 2015-03-20].

[43] C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 10.

[44] Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: How Our Founding Fathers Forged a Radical New Approach to Religious Liberty* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 35; "From John Adams to Samuel Quincy, 22 April 1761," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-01-02-0039 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[45] Ibid.

Adams renounce Calvinism, though? To better explain this, we must look at some of the overarching principles of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment is a complicated term to define, but it is imperative that we do so. Indeed, by understanding the main axioms of the Enlightenment, we can understand the conditions that led to many of the theological views of Adams and the major Founding Fathers as well. Primarily, by "Enlightenment," I mean the belief in the advances of science and scientific thinking to better the world, by using human reason based on evidence, not faith based on no evidence. Divine revelations and personal faith-experiences were not to be trusted or admired with enlightened thinking, as they were not rationally thought out. "Let the human mind loose," as Adams proclaimed, "It must be loose. It will be loose. Superstition and Dogmatism cannot confine it."[46] Adams of course meant that, when making decisions and when thinking philosophically about issues, one should not be burdened by dogma and superstition of specific religious creeds. In the tradition of what we now call the Enlightenment, the rationality of the human mind should always win out over any adherence to a religious text, the words of a preacher, or the viewpoints of a theologian.[47]

Now that we have investigated some Enlightenment principles, it is necessary for us to examine religion in the Revolutionary era among the Founders. Though the Founding Fathers all had unique religious views when viewed in detail, they did share some elemental commonalities that are worth mentioning, briefly. The Enlightenment

[46] Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders,* 88; "From John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 13 November 1816," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3207 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[47] Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders,* 86-8.

certainly influenced them all to varying degrees, making all of the main Founders renounce evangelical theological concepts such as using faith alone to come to religious conclusions and blindly accepting what preachers espoused. Gordon Wood, one of the preeminent scholars on the American Revolution and the Founders, sums up the common theological traits among the Founding Fathers in his award-winning *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. The entire passage is worth quoting in full because it gives the reader a general sense of the overarching themes of liberal religion for elites during the Revolutionary period:

> At the time of the Revolution most of the founding fathers had not put much emotional stock in religion, even when they were regular churchgoers. As enlightened gentleman, they abhorred "that gloomy superstition disseminated by ignorant illiberal preachers" and looked forward to the day when "the phantom of darkness will be dispelled by the rays of science, and the bright charms of rising civilization." At best, most of the revolutionary gentry only passively believed in organized Christianity and, at worst, privately scorned and ridiculed it. Jefferson hated orthodox clergymen, and he repeatedly denounced the "priestcraft" for having converted Christianity into "an engine for enslaving mankind, . . . into a mere contrivance to filch wealth and power to themselves." Although few of them were outright deists, most like David Ramsay described the Christian church as "the best temple of reason." Even puritanical John Adams thought that the argument for Christ's divinity was an "awful blasphemy" in this new enlightened age. When Hamilton was asked why members of the Philadelphia Convention had not recognized God in the Constitution, he allegedly replied, speaking for many of his liberal colleagues, "We forgot."[48]

Adams was influenced by Enlightenment era thinking, as mentioned in the above quote. He, like others in the Revolutionary generation, believed that America had become the fulfillment of the Enlightenment. He believed that the overall settlement of America had been "the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."[49]

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[48] Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 330.

[49] "[February 1765]," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0009-0002 [last update: 2015-03-20]). Source:

Adams and other Founding Fathers also thought that America was, mostly, more civilized than many other nations in the world, and he appreciated the spreading of science, liberty, rationality, and republican government.[50]

To be more civilized and enlightened, according to the upper classes of the time, was a part of what was referred to as a gentleman. A gentleman had to have certain characteristics about his character, politeness, education, and so on, which would all fit well into the concept that the elite in society had the responsibility to govern. And since the elite gentlemen had the responsibility to govern, they had the responsibility to provide a political structure, including a public religion, to make sure that citizens were acting morally. Furthermore, they had to be tolerant of other lifestyles and opinions, reasonable, virtuous, honest, and sincere, according to the prevailing mentality of the time. Indeed, Adams put all of these gentlemanly ideas into words that would, according to Gordon Wood, essentially summarize the current ideas of a liberal arts education in today's America. Of course, the above ideals of the Enlightenment greatly influenced the religious perspectives of the Revolutionary generation, and John Adams was indubitably affected by it all.[51]

We must now delve into the personal theological views of John Adams. These beliefs can be summed up in one word: Unitarianism, though other scholars have tried to describe him with terms such as "Christian Deist." [52] Or perhaps "proto-Unitarianism"

The Adams Papers, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 1, *1755–1770*, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 255–258.

[50] Wood, *Radicalism,* 191-5.

[51] Ibid., 191-5.

[52] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers,* 73-8.

could be a more proper term, but for practical purposes, it is more convenient to use Unitarianism. Using the term "Unitarianism" is fine as long as one recognizes that Unitarianism, like virtually any other denomination of Christianity, has changed over time. "Proto-Unitarianism" is indeed a correct term to use if that is the preferred stylistic choice, as the institutional structure of the Unitarian church would not be formed in a substantial way until the later years of Adams's life. But "Unitarianism" will suffice for our purposes here, since there is not a significant difference in belief systems between proto-Unitarians and Unitarians, and since it is easier for historians and other scholars to contextualize Adams and other proto-Unitarians of the time if "Unitarianism" is the standard word for scholars to use.[53]

Though Unitarianism at the time was very complex, the elementary, agreed-upon belief of Unitarians was this: God was monotheistic in that Jesus was not the same as God, therefore the concept of the Holy Trinity was not logical; however, Jesus was still extremely important for moral reasons, and even theological reasons. For example, Unitarians in general believed that Jesus was some sort of a "demigod," but not the same as the one true creator-God; thus, Unitarians rejected the absolute divinity of Jesus outright. They differed, however, on more detailed matters of who Jesus actually was and who he was not.[54]

Essentially there were two main types of Unitarianism during the lifetime of John Adams. Adams supported one school of thought that promoted a "Jesus from below" type

[53] See Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, and other textbooks on the history of religion in America for more on these topics.

[54] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers,* 73-8.

of view, where Jesus was originally just a human being. But then, he was chosen by God to become a "demigod" of sorts, because he was so subservient to the will of God, and because he was an extremely ethical person. The other school of Unitarian thought about Jesus that Adams was not as closely related to posited that Jesus was "from above" in that he was already a demigod; God had simply sent him down to earth from heaven as God's messenger. Nevertheless, both positions did not allow for a Holy Trinity as in traditional Christianity.[55]

Indeed, because Adams did not accept the doctrine of the Trinity, most scholars have described him as a Unitarian for this main reason, and indeed, there are not many denominations of Christianity present in America in the Revolutionary Era that would claim to be Christian while at the same time denying the Trinity. This rejection of Trinitarian Christianity is shown openly in the following letter to Thomas Jefferson, which was composed later in his life. It is probably the finest example of Adams's straightforward rhetorical style on religious topics, and it is worth quoting in full because it discusses the fact that Adams could not believe in the Trinity even in the presence of God-like forces:

> The human Understanding is a revelation from its Maker which can never be disputed or doubted. . . . This revelation has made it certain that two and one make three; and that one is not three; nor can three be one. . . . Had you and I been forty days with Moses on Mount Sinai and admitted to behold, the divine Shekinah, and there told that one was three and three, one: We might not have had the courage to deny it, but We could not have believed it. The thunders and Lightenings and Earthquakes and the transcendant Splendors and Glories, might have overwhelmed Us with terror and Amazement: but We could not have believed the doctrine.[56]

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[55] Ibid., 74.

[56] Hutson, *The Founders on Religion*, 216; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 14, 1813, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 373.

Certainly this quotation demonstrates that Adams did not find the concept of the Trinity to be appealing to what he thought of as his rational mind and human reason. Adams believed that Jefferson would agree with his sentiments and logic here as well, since they were both rational gentlemen who could distinguish between superstition and well-reasoned opinion. And, additionally, it must be pointed out that he was quite frank with his language in the quotation, which suggests that he was being honest. Even if "thunders and Lightenings and Earthquakes . . . might have overwhelmed Us with terror and Amazement . . ." Adams thought that they simply could not accept the existence of the Trinity. Surely an evangelical Christian during the Early Republic would not have taken this lightly, as Adams's words go against orthodox Christianity, which gives evidence that Adams did not care what the majority of Christians and Americans would think of such utterings. Therefore, a fair interpretation in this instance is that Adams was being mostly honest when he espoused his religious perspective on the Trinity and its rationality.[57]

Since his political career was over, and since Adams was known to say what he meant to say even if it would offend, it is reasonable to conclude that Adams should be trusted with a quotation such as this. Adams and Jefferson assuredly realized that their letters would be read by scholars, historians, and other interested people for centuries after their deaths, so the cynic might mistrust their letters between each other as they could be trying to correct the historical record or go along with what they thought were cultural trends. But readers should take Adams at his word, because he often appeared to

[57] Ibid.

say exactly what his opinions were, and because a careful reading of the text does not reveal any ulterior motives. Simply, this would not be the wisest way to go about things for the historian who is trying to be as objective as humanely possible. Therefore, scholars must characterize Adams as a Unitarian and only a Unitarian, which is the best term to use unless one wants to use "Proto-Unitarian" for certain chronological reasons. Nevertheless, according to the evidence Adams mostly followed the tenets of what scholars refer to as Unitarianism.

Furthermore, Adams also wrote this to his son, John Quincy, on the subject of the Trinity: "An incarnate God!!! An eternal, self-existent, omnipresent Author of this stupendous Universe, suffering on a Cross!!! My Soul starts with horror, at the Idea, and it has stupefied the Christian World. It has been the Source of almost all the Corruptions of Christianity."[58] This quotation also demonstrates that Adams did not find the concept of the Trinity to be appealing to his "rational mind" and "human reason." And without question, this quotation provides highly significant evidence for the position that historians should only refer to Adams as a Unitarian. Adams used some of his most candid language here, which no conservative Christian or believer in the Holy Trinity would have ever believed.

Adams was fairly religious though, just in different ways from mainstream orthodox Christianity. For example, he did believe that Christianity as a whole was a direct revelation from God, more or less: "Neither savage nor civilized man, without a

[58] Hutson, *The Founders on* Religion, 121; "From John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 28 March 1816," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3058 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

revelation, could ever have discovered or invented it."[59] But this divine revelation's true aspects had been "mixed with 'millions of fables, tales, legends' to create 'the most bloody religion that ever existed.'"[60] Adams went to church on a regular basis, though in a liberal church, nonetheless, calling himself a "meeting [church] going animal."[61] In the early days of the American Revolution, while in Philadelphia, he spent most of his Sundays at various churches, sometimes going two or three times a day to church services. He visited houses of worship from different denominations while in Philadelphia, including Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers. And he thought that Christianity was the embodiment of "the eternal, self-existent, independent, benevolent, all powerful and all merciful creator, preserver and father of the universe, the first god, first perfect, and first fair."[62]

Adams certainly thought of himself as a Christian by his own definitions of the word: "Howl, Snarl, bite, Ye Calvinistick! Ye Athanasian Divines, if You will. Ye will say, I am no Christian: I say Ye are no Christians: and there the Account is ballanced. Yet I believe all the honest men among you, are Christians in my Sense of the Word."[63] What

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[59] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 36; "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 21 January 1810," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5504 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[60] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35; "From John Adams to François Adriaan Van der Kemp, 27 December 1816," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6681 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[61] Waldman, *Founding Faith,* 36; "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 28 August 1811," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5678 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[62]Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 36; "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 21 January 1810," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5504 [last update: 2015-03-20]); McCullough, *John Adams*, 83.

[63] John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 14, 1813, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 374.

Adams meant by "his sense of the word Christian" was that a true Christian followed the ethical teachings of Jesus and did not trust much of the divine aspects of Jesus, as that was not rational and had been distorted over Christian history. At least this is what the scholar gathers after reading through Adams's writings from over the course of Adams's life. Adams could only consider people who believed in a more liberal interpretation of Christianity, such as Unitarianism, not the more conservative and evangelical type, as being legitimate Christians.

After reading some of Thomas Paine's works that endorsed a Deistic view of religion, Adams wrote an entry in his diary that stated: "The Christian religion is, above all the religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern times, the religion of wisdom, virtue, equity, and humanity, let blackguard Paine say what he will."[64] Despite technically being a Unitarian and not being an orthodox Christian, Adams still felt that Christianity was the most perfect religion in the history of human civilization, and he was unequivocally convinced that God intervened in human events. Waldman does a nice job with summing up the fact that Adams believed in divine intervention: "He believed that God was dictating events. . . . Adams thought God had chosen him for his political career and the presidency. . . . After his election to the presidency in 1796, he told Abigail that the results reflected 'the voice of God.'"[65]

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[64] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 36-7; "July 26. 1796. Tuesday.," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-03-02-0013-0002-0015 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[65] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 37, 229; "John Adams to Abigail Adams, 20 Jan. 1796," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-01-02-0965 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

Adams simply believed that religion, specifically Christianity, was indispensable for civil society, as, in his opinion, it suppressed human barbarity and made citizens competent. Moreover, Adams ardently defended the perception of an afterlife, and without it, he thought life was irrelevant. However, even though he believed religion was a civilizing force, he did not necessarily agree with sending Bibles overseas or forcing religion on foreign lands, as he was sometimes disillusioned with organized religion. "So grumpy was he about Christianity-as-often-practiced that he even criticized distribution of Bibles to other lands. 'Would it not be better, to apply these pious Subscriptions, to purify Christendom from the Corruptions of Christianity; than to propagate those Corruptions in Europe Asia, Africa, and America!'"[66]

To contemporary audiences, John Adams might seem hypocritical and contradictory in his thinking on theistic matters. But with an intellect as colossal as Adams's, fluctuating perspectives on religion can be expected, particularly with old age and after much thinking on the subject. As mentioned before, he thought certain aspects of standard Christianity were ludicrous, and yet, like a pious Christian, he was reluctant to travel on the Sabbath.[67] He loved Christianity as a whole, but of course he did not follow some of the most popular and important teachings of mainstream Christianity, most notably the idea of the Trinity. Further, "he hated religion's tendency to squelch rational thought but admired its effectiveness at instilling morality."[68] So on the surface,

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[66] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35-8; "From John Adams to François Adriaan Van der Kemp, 27 December 1816," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6681 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[67] McCullough, *John Adams*, 20.

[68] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 38.

Adams's theological convictions could be viewed as unscrupulous because they do not fit many conventional belief systems. But when his opinions are studied, the mind of Adams on the subject of religion is revealed, at least as much as possible. Indeed, a lifetime of academic examination would be required to get close to comprehensively understanding Adam's innermost self.[69]

For Adams, all of these beliefs have been called "Christian Deism" or "Deistic Christianity," but "Unitarian" is still the most proper term that the historian can use. It cannot be emphasized enough: since Adams believed in biblical miracles, a personal God, and in Jesus as the "Redeemer of humanity," he was not a Deist in the sense that God made the universe and left it alone. He believed in an intervening God in human affairs, and indeed held that Jesus was an important religious figure; he just did not believe in the Holy Trinity as explained in the Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed of early Christian history. And he did not subscribe to beliefs such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, calling the idea an awful blasphemy, Calvinistic predestination, and the concept of total depravity. Adams contended that his God had "given us Reason, to find out the Truth, and the real Design and true End of our Existence."[70] Furthermore, Adams declared that human beings should use their reason and intellect to study nature, so that they may be able to learn about God's creation and better comprehend it.[71]

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, 78; "22 Sunday.," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0002-0008-0009 [last update: 2015-03-20]). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 1, *1755–1770*, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 42–44.

[71] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 330.; Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers,* 74-8.

Adams was simply "unwilling to accept that Adam's [from the Adam and Eve story] bite of the apple 'damned the whole human Race, without any actual Crimes committed by any of them.'"[72] Naturally rejecting the major aspects of orthodox Christianity, Adams regarded the argument that the crucifixion of Jesus saved humanity from their sins as ridiculous: "After hearing a dinner companion defend as 'mysterious' the idea that Jesus's crucifixion saved us from our sins, Adams wrote in his diary, 'Thus mystery is made a convenient cover for absurdity.'"[73] Of course, like any typical Unitarian, he did not find the concept of the Trinity logical. "Miracles or Prophecies might frighten Us out of our Witts; might scare us toe death; might induse Us to lie; to say that We believe that 2 and 2 make 5. But We should not believe it."[74] Adams's church that he attended most of his life, the First Parish Church of Quincy, Massachusetts, eventually became officially Unitarian in the eighteenth century as well.[75]

The above points directly contradict the somewhat clichéd notion that Adams and the rest of the Founding Fathers were mainly Deists. It is clearly evident that Adams was what would best be categorized as Unitarian in his theological belief system. One could be pedantic and use the term "proto-Unitarian" instead, but either one will suffice when

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[72] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35; "[August 1756]," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0002-0008 [last update: 2015-03-20]). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 1, *1755–1770*, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 39–44.

[73] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35; "[February 1756]," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0002-0002 [last update: 2015-03-20]). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, vol. 1, *1755–1770*, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 4–10.

[74] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 14, 1813, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 373.

[75] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 35.

the scholar wants to describe the religious beliefs of John Adams. The above points also directly contradict the idea that the Founders were all evangelical Christians who believed in traditional Trinitarian Christianity. This is not a serious scholarly argument, but it appears to be believed widely among more popular audiences. Nevertheless, the historian can best describe Adams's theology as Unitarian, and it is important to look at how it influenced decisions he made in his life, when he was helping to form the Massachusetts state constitution, and during his presidency, for example.

CHAPTER V

APPLICATIONS: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

Adams supported government that financially supported the church, at least on a state level. He promoted this very idea in his home state of Massachusetts, mainly for the idea of religion making people moral.[76] This is evident from an excellent article by John Witte Jr., where he describes that Adams supported the state constitution of Massachusetts for various reasons, because "every polity [had to] establish by law some form of public religion, some image and ideal of itself, some common values and beliefs to undergird and support the plurality of private religions . . ." since without "a commonly adopted set of values and beliefs, politicians would invariably hold out their private convictions as public ones. In Adams's view, the creed of this public religion was honesty, diligence, devotion, obedience, virtue, and love of God, neighbor, and self."[77]

In addition, Adams stated the following in relation to the establishment of religion in Massachusetts/New England: "New England has in many Respects the Advantage of every other Colony in America, and indeed of every other Part of the World, that I know any Thing of . . . . The Institutions in New England for the Support of Religion, Morals and Decency, exceed any other, obliging every Parish to have a Minister, and every

[76] Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 16, 26.; Hutson, *The Founders on Religion*, 60; "John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0210 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[77] John Witte Jr., "'A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion': John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment," *Journal of Church and State* 41, no. 2 (1999): 216-7.

Person to go to Meeting."[78] And of course, for "morality" in public and private life, Adams believed that there "is no such thing [morality] without a supposition of a God. There is no right or wrong in the universe without the supposition of a moral government and an intellectual and moral governor. . . . Religion I hold to be essential to morals."[79] Clearly, these quotations show that Adams considered religion to be, as he put it, essential with morality; and clearly, Adams liked the fact that there was an establishment of religion in New England, which would morally help society. Simply, he believed in a virtuous society, and religion would make that more possible. He did not, however, take his belief to the extreme to say that the federal government should always financially support religion directly, even though he found a place for religion in public life, which is shown by, for example, national proclamations he made as president, which will be discussed later.

We must now turn to a couple of examples of, I would argue, how Adams demonstrated his distinct form of Unitarianism, that was influenced by the Enlightenment and, to certain extents, by his Puritan/Calvinist upbringing, in public life, particularly during his presidency. One example: President Adams signed the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, after little debate in the Senate produced the requisite two-thirds vote for ratification.[80] The details of most of the treaty are not necessary for our purposes, other

[78]Huston, *The Founders on Religion,* 60; "John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0210 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[79] Huston, *The Founders on Religion*, 146-7; "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 18 April 1808," Founders Online, National Archives (http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5238 [last update: 2015-03-20]).

[80] Though no recorded debate exists over the section known as Article 11, which follows below. It is interesting that debate over this part of the treaty did not occur, as it defined the federal government as being secular instead of religious. Surely historical knowledge of the Crusades and other violent religious

than to know that it was a treaty with a Muslim nation that wanted to make sure that the United States was not seen as a Christian nation. The eleventh article of this treaty bluntly stated the following:

> As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion, -- as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen [Muslims], -- and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahomet [Muslim] nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.[81]

As we can see, this treaty told the world that the United States government was not founded on Christianity, and apparently it was not really controversial after it was passed and printed for the public. Surely this meant that Adams did not support government funds going to religion in any way. But perhaps surprisingly, Adams's views on the subject of church-state relations were much more complicated than that.[82]

Adams believed in a rational God, no doubt, and one who could help society morally. This sense of morality is key: Unitarians greatly admired Jesus Christ, chiefly for his ethics. Later in his life, Adams wrote to Jefferson and indeed proclaimed that

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events necessitated that the federal government of the United States would stay secular. The Revolutionary generation wanted to apply knowledge learned from the past: "Violence between Christian monarchs and Islamic powers in the Holy Land had been a recurring theme of life for five hundred years, and the rise of seafaring technology meant that Americans, Europeans, and Islamic peoples would be increasingly encountering one another as different regions of the world were linked by a growing network of global commerce -- hence the problem of Muslim piracy against American shipping far from American shores." See Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), 103-4, 262. This is a book that is aimed at more popular audiences, but it should be considered a standard in the field, as it contains excellent research, good prose, and erudite interpretations.

[81] Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*, 239.

[82] Ibid., 239-41.

"[Jesus] was, as you say, 'the most benevolent Being that ever appeard on Earth.'"[83] Indeed, Adams emphasized the Sermon on the Mount because of Adams's "respect and reverence for the life and teachings of Jesus Christ": "The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my Religion."[84] Likewise, Adams praised Jesus's ethics by expressing that "[Jesus's teachings were] the most benevolent and sublime, probably that has been ever taught and more perfect than those of any of the ancient Philosophers."[85]

Since Unitarians admired Jesus for his morality, they wanted to emulate Jesus' morality in actual life. Unitarianism as a whole emphasized this more philosophical and ethical Jesus, and perhaps for Adams, if society mimicked the Unitarian Jesus, society would be more virtuous. Therefore, Adams would want to have a public presence for religion. Adams cared deeply for his country, so surely he wanted to see his fellow countrymen act in an ethical way as well. C. Bradley Thompson advances the argument that Adams wanted a public religion that would influence American citizens to be more ethical, but he does so by emphasizing the Enlightenment and not by emphasizing Unitarianism itself.[86] Thompson discusses interpretations by famous scholars in the field of the American Revolution and colonial America, Edmund S. Morgan and Bernard

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[83]Huston, *The Founders on Religion*, 121; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 2, 1816, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 462.

[84] John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 193; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 4, 1816, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 494.

[85] Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 193; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 18, 1813, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 361-362.

[86] Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 3-23.

Bailyn, who emphasized the Puritan/Calvinist background of Adams's life, and Thompson revises their argument by talking about the Enlightenment and its effect on Adams contrary to Puritanism/Calvinism.[87] Thompson should have gone even further, however, and talked about the theological aspects of Unitarianism, particularly the ethical view of Jesus, as they were quite significant to Adams and his actions.

Thus, Adams did not have a problem with some governmental support for religion, as shown by certain acts during his presidency. Two times during Adams's presidency, he proclaimed national days of thanksgiving: national fast days, to show obedience to God and to hope for God's help in human affairs.[88] This national promotion of fasting was in large part to get God's divine help in a "quasi" naval war with France at the time.[89] Adams worked adamantly for the cause of peace with France in this Quasi-War, and since Adams, like other Unitarians, focused on Jesus's peaceful moral teachings instead of the more theistic teachings of Christianity, certainly peace was a priority for him. And his work for peace was fruitful, with the Treaty of Mortefontaine of 1800, effectively ending the Quasi-War with France.[90]

The actual text of the "day of fasting and prayer" in 1798 is interesting. One of the principal reasons is the fact that some of the language, at least ostensibly, appears to be obviously Christian language, with terms such as "Almighty God" and "Heaven" being used. But in reality, the text never mentions the Trinity, Jesus, or any term directly

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Huston, *The Founders on Religion*, 100.

[89] Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?,* 201.

[90] Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 275.

referencing the Abrahamic God, though the text does use terms such as "Redeemer of the World" and "Holy Spirit" to refer to different manifestations of the Trinity, in an indirect way. If Adams had had a desire to promote traditional Christianity or show that the federal government of the United States was founded on Christianity, perhaps he would have used such orthodox vocabulary. The language of the text reflects a set of vocabulary that would be a much better fit with Unitarianism or even Deism, depending on your interpretation, but the language would certainly not go well with standard Christianity.[91]

The proclamation starts off with the following, which defines the basic purposes for issuing the proclamation: "As the safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessings of Almighty God. . . ."[92] The text continues with an explanation of why being devoted to God would help the United States morally and with "social Happiness," since God would intervene by recognizing the American devotion to God, which would please God, and then deciding to help the United States against France. Moreover, the text plainly states that, under dire circumstances, citizens of the United States only had one choice if they would eventually gain the advantage in the quasi-war with France: "Under these considerations [problems with France] it has appeared to me that the Duty of imploring the Mercy and Benediction of Heaven on our Country demands, at this time a special attention from its Inhabitants."[93] The second paragraph of the proclamation is worth quoting in full,

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[91] "John Adams Proclaims a Day of Fasting and Prayer, 1798" in *The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents*, eds. Matthew L. Harris and Thomas S. Kidd (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 125-7.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

because it is much easier to get a sense of how the religious language was used in a public and political context:

> I have therefore thought fit to recommend, and I do hereby recommend, that Wednesday, the 9th day of May next, be observed throughout the United States as a day of solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer; that the citizens of these States, abstaining on that day from their customary worldly occupations, offer their devout addresses to the Father of Mercies agreeably to those forms or methods which they have severally adopted as the most suitable and becoming; that all religious congregations do, with the deepest humility, acknowledge before God the manifold sins and transgressions with which we are justly chargeable as individuals and as a nation, beseeching Him at the same time, of His infinite grace, through the Redeemer of the World, freely to remit all our offenses, and to incline us by His Holy Spirit to that sincere repentance and reformation which may afford us reason to hope for his inestimable favor and heavenly benediction; that it be made the subject of particular and earnest supplication that our country may be protected from all the dangers which threaten it; that our civil and religious privileges may be preserved inviolate and perpetuated to the latest generations; that our public councils and magistrates may be especially enlightened and directed at this critical period; that the American people may be united in those bonds of amity and mutual confidence and inspired with that vigor and fortitude by which they have in times past been so highly distinguished and by which they have obtained such invaluable advantages; that the health of the inhabitants of our land may be preserved, and their agriculture, commerce, fisheries, arts, and manufactures be blessed and prospered; that the principles of genuine piety and sound morality may influence the minds and govern the lives of every description of our citizens, and that the blessings of peace, freedom, and pure religion may be speedily extended to all the nations of the earth.[94]

And at the end of the proclamation, Adams says that "on the said day the duties of humiliation and prayer be accompanied by fervent thanksgiving to the Bestower of Every Good Gift, not only for His having hitherto protected and preserved the people of these United States in the independent enjoyment of their religious and civil freedom, but also for having prospered them in a wonderful progress of population, and for conferring on them many and great favors conducive to the happiness and prosperity of a nation."[95]

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

Other than showing that Adams believed that God could act in the world, therefore, making him not a Deist, his proclamations showed that he did not have a problem with the federal government effectively supporting religion. While these actions prove that Adams, as a Founder, was not a near-secular Deist as many on the modern political left would like to claim, his national days of thanksgiving and fasting cannot be used as evidence that Adams and the rest of the Founding Fathers were what the modern political right would want to promote as evangelical, fundamentalist Christians. Indeed, this support of religion was not an establishment of a particular denomination or even of general Christianity itself, as the term "God" can be defined in many ways and because Adams, along with many of the first presidents, liked to use religious language that was less specific than just mentioning "Jesus" or the "Abrahamic God." Adams's actions as president show a support of civic morality brought about by a public religion that did not necessarily have to be the religion of traditional, orthodox Christianity, even if Adams preferred the Christian religion overall. Admittedly, this is a difficult concept for people in the twenty-first century to grasp fully. People in the present day are accustomed to viewing church-state relations in a more rigid manner: you either have no religious activity in the public sphere or you have a borderline theocracy. In Adams's generation, there was more of a middle ground between these two extremes.

Since Adams publicly advocated general Christian beliefs as the second president of the United States, it can be argued that he wanted to create a public identity for himself that suggested he was a Christian. Of the first presidents, especially the first four presidents from George Washington to James Madison, and especially when compared to

Thomas Jefferson, "John Adams was the most overtly Christian from his bully pulpit."[96] Even though he was the most overtly Christian president of the early republic era of American history, Adams still was a Unitarian, as emphasized before. Unlike Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine, to name three Founders who were more public with their religious beliefs than Adams was, Adams did not publicly support such liberal religions as Unitarianism and Deism. But of course, he surreptitiously agreed with many of the facets of those movements' ideologies, while endorsing mainstream religion on the surface. And this public approval of orthodox Christianity would help Adams in the presidency: "Adams's willingness to employ Christian rhetoric on such occasions [as during the national days of fasting] largely shielded him from questions about his own faith."[97]

These themes had much to do with the two main political factions/parties of the time, as the Jeffersonian Republicans had a different style compared to the Federalists, the party of Adams, Washington, and Alexander Hamilton: "As political conservatives, Federalists tended to value religion, tradition, and family authority as means of fostering social, economic, and political order. In contrast, Jefferson and many Republicans saw religion as a personal matter and denounced established churches as fetters on freedom."[98] In fact, during the election of 1800 between Jefferson and Adams, the

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[96] Waldman, *Founding Faith*, 164.

[97] Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 231.

[98] Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York: Free Press. 2008), 166. Another excellent book on the same topic in the Oxford University Press Pivotal Moments in American History series is John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Federalists politically attacked Jefferson by accusing of him of being an atheist because of his known liberal opinions on religion. Then the Federalists called on the "Protestant majority" in America to support Federalist, "God-fearing" candidates, including Adams of course. Federalists thought this was politically astute, as evangelicalism was on the rise in America at the time, and a majority of Americans thought that there was some public role for civic displays of religion. One Federalist-supporting newspaper attacked Jefferson with a statement asserting that, if you voted for Adams, you were voting for "God and a religious president": if you voted for Jefferson, you were voting for "no God and an anti-religious president."[99]

Finally, the institutional structure -- church government -- of Unitarianism is also important to look at, regarding connections between the church and the state. Apparently, Unitarianism did not have a strict church government during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, though: "Unitarianism has no peculiar church government of its own. It began in Boston . . . among the Episcopalians; it then seemed to work in harmony with Congregationalism; in many instances now it has no ecclesiastical organization distinct from the whole body of attendants; while in England they call themselves Presbyterians." One could even advance the interpretation that, because Unitarianism lacked a rigorous polity, some Unitarians like Adams would not have cared if religion were promoted publicly; it might not have bothered them. Future scholars should focus much of their time and research on this particular aspect of Unitarianism in relation to how Unitarians viewed the public presence of religion for the purposes of

[99] Waldman, *Founding* Faith, 164-5.; Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe*, 51, 166; Meacham, *American Gospel*, 104.

promoting morality. One could investigate how the Unitarian national polity developed from the proto-Unitarian days through the nineteenth century and even to the present day with Unitarian-Universalism. This could give insight into the Unitarian theological perspective on church-state relations. For the Unitarian John Adams and his views on church-state relations, actions during his presidency do a much better job with suggesting how he really felt on the matter.[100]

[100] Joseph Belcher, *The Religious Denominations in the United States: Their History, Doctrine, Government and Statistics* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter, 1859), 774.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that historians should only refer to John Adams as a Unitarian. The evidence is obvious that Adams did not believe in the Holy Trinity, and he followed standard Unitarian contentions when he essentially laughed at the concept of Jesus/God dying on a cross in human form. He refused to accept miracles and other "superstitious" beliefs for the most part, yet, he accepted that the Christian God could intervene in human affairs from time to time and that the Abrahamic God could direct human history. At first glance, Adams might seem like a contradiction, but with the understanding that he was a Unitarian who could be both a liberal theologically, as well as be a Christian in certain technical ways, scholars should not view Adams as a contradiction at all. He was just complex and was an intellectual, and it takes much research to even begin to understand the man.

Adams believed in a rational God and one who could morally help society; this must be emphasized once again. Understanding Adams's distinct theological beliefs can indeed help us explain Adams's actions, particularly as president. Moreover, I argue that the concept of a civic morality being brought about by religion was influenced by Unitarianism, especially the Unitarian view of an ethical Jesus. Fundamentally, if the public acted like the Unitarian Jesus, society would be more ethical as a result.

Thus, when evaluating Adams's views on public religion, scholars should not only consider themes such as the New England Puritan tradition and Enlightenment philosophy. Hitherto, scholarship has focused on this Puritan and Calvinist background

and Enlightenment philosophy and how they have affected Adams's standpoints on church and state relations. Scholarship has failed to put enough emphasis on Adams's personal theology of Unitarianism. From scholars such as Edmund S. Morgan, to Bernard Bailyn, to C. Bradley Thompson, scholarship has failed to fully recognize the importance of John Adams's personal theology to his life and actions, and how Unitarianism was related to the idea of a separation of church and state for John Adams. Future scholarship should give more priority to Unitarianism and how it influenced Adams and indeed even the United States as a whole. Scholars will have to look at and analyze the institutional church structure of Unitarianism before and during the lifetime of Adams in a more detailed fashion and to relate that to Adams and his views on church and state relations as well.

Scholars should not overlook the religion of John Adams, as the public career of John Adams should not be overlooked. His public life was one of the most important of the Revolutionary period, as he was prominent in some of the most significant events of the American Revolution. And his particular religious viewpoints were unmistakably unique and intriguing, even compared to most of his other liberal colleagues from the Revolutionary time period.

It is erroneous to say that, because John Adams was not an orthodox Christian, he did not have strong religious beliefs and was not a true Christian in the sense in which he understood the term. It is also incorrect to say that he did not consider faith somewhat important in his life. He prided himself on using human reason and intellect to come to conclusions, but with just about any religion, there is a faith element that does not focus on human rationality. So Adams was really not on either extreme of the religious

spectrum; he was not anti-religious but he was not an evangelical either. He was somewhere in the middle, as Unitarianism combined secular reason and the liberal theological components of Christianity. This history should be understood by students of American religious history and anyone interested in compelling historical figures like John Adams.

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