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**A Massachusetts Yankee in the Court of Charleston:  
Jasper Adams, College President in Antebellum South Carolina**

**By**

**Gerald Vaughn**

Massachusetts clergyman and educator Jasper Adams (1793-1841) was among the line of notable descendants of Henry Adams (1583-1646), who fled persecution in England circa 1630 and settled on a farm in the Braintree area, then part of Boston. The most notable of Henry Adams's descendants include U.S. presidents John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, William Howard Taft, and Calvin Coolidge, and Vice-President Richard Cheney. John Adams erected a monument in Henry Adams's honor in Quincy, Massachusetts.

Jasper Adams grew to manhood in Massachusetts. His travels in adult life took him from Massachusetts to South Carolina, where he gained his renown. While his career was spent mostly in the south he was a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, at Boston, and a Corresponding Member of the Massachusetts' Historical Society.

In 1830 Boston and Charleston were respectively America's fourth and sixth largest cities in population. There were many differences and some similarities between the two cities. Education was one of the most glaring differences.

When Adams accepted the presidency of South Carolina's College of Charleston in 1824, he faced a fundamental problem: too many young men of leisure, sons of wealthy planters in a slave agriculture, were sent to college by their fathers but lacked an innate desire to learn and work. Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease write that:

Jasper Adams, Yankee president of the College of Charleston, knew that the imperative to display leisure burdened the life of the mind. In a culture “where our peculiar institutions [read this, slavery] free most of our young men from the necessities of personal labour,” he said to the collegians of the Euphradian Society, “the love of ease, the appetite for frivolous amusements, the seductions of pleasure, and the impulses of false honour, constitute obstacles...[most] formidable to intellectual achievement.”<sup>1</sup>

Further write the Pease’s:

When Boston’s [substitute Massachusetts’s] youth or books and magazines went south, it was to teach rather than to learn, to proffer expertise rather than to seek recognition. This very self-confidence was what made Northerners simultaneously welcome and unwelcome in Charleston. At issue was a pervasive unease. Though Charlestonians valued education, pursued science, and admired the arts, they doubted their own ability to excel and their society’s commitment to intellectual achievement.

Adams is well remembered for his sermon titled “The Relation of Christianity to Civil Government in the United States,” which he preached in St. Michael’s Church, Charleston, South Carolina, on February 13, 1833, an address before the convention of the Protestant

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<sup>1</sup> Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, “Intellectual Life in the 1830s: The Institutional Framework and the Charleston Style,” in *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston*, Michael O’Brien and David Moltke-Hansen, eds. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 252-254. Their quotation of Adams comes from his speech titled *Laws of Success and Failure in Life; An Address, Delivered 30th October, 1833, in the Chapel of the College of Charleston, before the Euphradian Society* (Charleston, SC: A. E. Miller, 1833), 14. For elaboration, comparison, and contrast, see William H. and Jane H. Pease’s *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828- 1843* (1985).

Episcopal Church of the Diocese of South Carolina. His controversial sermon was widely distributed and received nationwide attention. Adams's address and its impact comprise the subject of Daniel L. Dreisbach's book *Religion and Politics in the Early Republic: Jasper Adams and the Church-State Debate* (1996).

However, it is this author's thesis that Adams made other, more substantial contributions to antebellum American thought, particularly in the South, which if less controversial were more timely and significant. It is the purpose of this article to discuss especially Adams's contributions to improving early southern higher education. They center around his concept of moral philosophy, or the duties and relations of each individual one to another. With regard to the governance of higher education, this meant to him resolving the uncertain division of duties and detrimental relations between academic trustees and faculty, to the benefit of students for whom they were responsible.

Adams's contributions came to greatest fruition in 1837 with publication of his textbook *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, which provided the analytical framework for his address before the American Institute of Instruction in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the troublesome relations existing between trustees and faculty at American universities, colleges, and academies. There is probably more benefit to southern and American higher education in these two writings than anything else he wrote.

Adams was born in East Medway, Massachusetts, on August 27, 1793. His father, also named Jasper, and mother Emma (Rounds) Adams had a farm on which young Jasper lived the first 17 years of his life. In his seventeenth year, after receiving a rudimentary childhood education, he was determined to attend college. He prepared under the tutelage of the Rev. Luther Wright (1770-1858), a Harvard College alumnus and pastor of the First Church of Christ in Medway. Adams studied so well that he was admitted to Brown University the next year and graduated in 1815, ranking second in his class. At Brown he studied moral philosophy and metaphysics under Massachusetts-born Congregationalist clergyman and professor, the Rev. Calvin Park.

Park taught from British author William Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), but according to Jacob Ide: "In Philosophy as well as in Theology he [Park] agreed essentially with [Jonathan] Edwards." Paley's was the most widely used textbook on moral and political philosophy in American colleges and universities in

the first third of the nineteenth century. It was clearly written and fairly well thought-out, if not profound. Edwards had no book in print that was comparable.<sup>2</sup>

H. Meyer observes:

A fundamental difference in point of view separates Jonathan Edwards from most philosophers, even most Christian philosophers, in the mid-nineteenth century. Whereas Edwards regarded man primarily as a sinner in the hands of an angry God, the later thinkers thought of man primarily as a responsible moral agent performing the duties of a citizen in a vast moral government.

Meyer goes on to say:

But, in a way, none of this mattered very much. There was never any real doubt that man had been constituted a moral being, able to know and to obey God's moral law. The confusing vagaries of theoretical ethics, as Jasper Adams observed, must not be permitted to distract the mind from the real concern--the demands of practical morals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Ide, "Calvin Park," in *Annals of the American Pulpit...*, Vol. II, Trinitarian Congregational, William B. Sprague, ed. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 462; for a thorough discussion of Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* and his related works, and their usage in the US, see Wilson Smith, *Professors & Public Ethics: Studies of Northern Moral Philosophers before the Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), Chapter III, "William Paley's Theological Utilitarianism in America," 44-73; by comparison Edwards's two most relevant works, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Vertue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (1754) and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765) had not stood the test of time so well.

<sup>3</sup> D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 53-54, 59.

Having entered Brown University with the intention of becoming a physician, Adams had a change of heart and decided to become an Episcopal clergyman. He taught at Phillips Andover Academy for three years, two of which he also studied at Andover Theological Seminary which had opened in 1808.

James W. Fraser writes: "From the outset the founding of Andover Seminary created a stir in the American Protestant religious world...The Andover plan was adaptable, and the basic idea of a three-year, three or four professor, post-college theological seminary would indeed be used for many different ends." At Andover the three major professors then were Leonard Woods, Moses Stuart, and Ebenezer Porter. Woods was professor of Christian theology and taught essentially orthodox trinitarian Calvinism. Fraser tells us when Woods deviated he stood corrected: "When Leonard Woods published an implied criticism of the Westminster Confession [a long-accepted summary of Christian doctrines], he was taken to task and modified his views." Stuart was professor of sacred literature and encouraged his brightest students to study German biblical scholarship, a method known as the "lower criticism"; he successfully defended his position. Porter was professor of sacred rhetoric and ecclesiastical history; his strength was rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

Though ordained a deacon in the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1819 and a priest in 1820, by the Rt. Rev. Alexander V. Griswold, Bishop of the Eastern Diocese, Adams was still groping to find his niche in life. He now found himself inclining toward the field of education instead of the pastoral ministry.

Adams returned to Brown University as a tutor in 1818-19 and received an honorary Master of Arts degree from Yale College in 1819. He demonstrated such teaching ability that Brown named him professor of mathematics and natural philosophy in 1819. While teaching at Brown University Adams lived his first two years in the home of the Rev. Calvin Park, his former professor of moral philosophy and metaphysics. Park's son Edwards A. Park, later a professor at the Andover Theological Seminary, recalled of Adams:

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<sup>4</sup> James W. Fraser, "The Beginning of Theological Education At Andover," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 13, 2 (1985), 112,110.

In his class at College [Brown University] he moved forward, shoulder to shoulder, with President Wilbur Fisk (sic) [Fiske became president of Wesleyan University, 1831-39]; and in his class at the Andover Theological Seminary he retained an honourable position among such men as Dr. Orville Dewey, Dr. Jonas King, Professors [Henry] Ripley, [Joseph] Torrey and [Charles] Haddock, Presidents [Francis] Wayland [president, Brown University, 1826- 55], [John] Wheeler [president, University of Vermont, 1833-40] and Worthington Smith [president, University of Vermont, 1849-55].<sup>5</sup>

Further, Park writes:

The life of President Adams also illustrates the changes to which an honest mind is liable amid the diversified influences of society. He was trained in his youth under the most rigid rules of Puritanism, as they are exemplified in the ministry and the writings of Samuel Niles, David Sanford and Nathaniel Emmons. His home was near the birth-place of such men as Alexander M. Fisher, Joel Hawes and Enoch Pond. Yet he became not only a firm Episcopalian, but an admirer and an advocate of the Oxford Tracts...He was unbending in his adherence to what he deemed true or right. He knew more of books than of men; and more of the spirit of Jesus than of all things else.<sup>6</sup>

Adams was married in 1820 to Mercy D. Wheeler of East Medway, Massachusetts, who bore him a son before her death in 1821. Afflicted with grief at the loss of his wife, Adams's own health began to worsen in the New England climate. Consequently in 1824 he accepted the post of

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<sup>5</sup> Edwards A. Park, "Jasper Adams," in *Annals of the American Pulpit...*, Vol. V, Episcopalian, William B. Sprague, ed. (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), 645.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 645-646.

Principal (afterward changed to President) of the College of Charleston, South Carolina. This never had been more than a mediocre college, in fact hardly more than a preparatory or grammar school, struggling to survive. Something of the missionary zeal, so strongly instilled at Andover, may have added to Adams's motivation to seek to save this declining college. Despite Adams's best efforts at progress, however, he was discouraged by the trustees' and community's lack of support for needed improvements, especially a new college main building. He had one stroke of good fortune while there; he met and, in 1824, married Placidia Mayrant of Charleston, who bore him five children.

Stymied that first year at the College of Charleston, in 1825 Adams almost accepted a professorship at Amherst College. However, he decided to stay in Charleston and redouble his efforts to improve the situation. After one more year he left with mostly added disappointment, but there was some appreciation for his efforts.

In 1826 Adams accepted the first presidency of newly-established Geneva (now Hobart) College in New York. Adams's inaugural discourse at Geneva was uncommonly prophetic:

A theatre of action so splendid and so interesting as that which is opening before the generation to which you belong, has never been presented in any period of the world. The mighty tide of our population will, during the probable period of your lives, find its resting place at the boundaries of Mexico and on the shores of the Pacific. You may be instrumental in forming, strengthening, and consolidating institutions, that will affect the destiny of millions.

Unfortunately Adams's time at Geneva was scarcely more pleasant or productive than his previous stay at Charleston, and for essentially the same reasons. He received little support from the trustees and community for needed improvements.<sup>7</sup>

In recognition of Adams's high callings to two college presidencies, Columbia College in New York City conferred on him in 1827 the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. Meanwhile, stagnation at the

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<sup>7</sup> Jasper Adams, *An Inaugural Discourse, Delivered in Trinity Church, Geneva, New-York, August 1, 1827* (Geneva: James Bogert, 1827), 49.



College of Charleston prompted its trustees to implore him to return, this time with assurances of full support including immediate erection of a new main building. These assurances, together with his yearning for a warmer clime and nearness to his wife's family, caused Adams to resign from Geneva in 1828 and resume his presidency at Charleston.

Upon returning to Charleston, Adams was able to report to the Rev. Sewall Harding of Waltham, Massachusetts: "Our college is rising as rapidly perhaps as any similar institution ever was. Our new edifice is nearly completed & we have begun to occupy it. It is one of the most beautiful & commodious edifices of the kind in this country."<sup>8</sup>

When named president of the College of Charleston the second time, Adams became ex-officio Horry Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy. In 1828 Elias Horry, a Charleston mayor, state legislator, lawyer, planter, railroad president, philanthropist, and trustee of the College of Charleston, granted \$10,000 to the College to fund a professorship in moral and political philosophy, to be occupied by the president. One may assume that Horry desired to elevate the status of this subject at the College, placing it in the hands of the president as was customary at many American colleges and universities.<sup>9</sup>

Adams was an inquisitive man and spent many mornings for two years studying the German "lower criticism" of the Bible with Massachusetts-born Unitarian pastor Samuel Gilman. E. Brooks Holifield writes:

The most articulate Southern representative of New  
England liberalism was Samuel Gilman (1791-1858),

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<sup>8</sup> Jasper Adams, letter to the Rev. Sewall Harding, Waltham, MA, Nov. 8, 1828, in possession of the Manuscripts Division, South Carolina Library, University South Carolina Society, University of South Carolina.

<sup>9</sup> Adams did not teach this subject during his first administration. From 1824 to 1828 it was taught by John Dickson (1795-1847), a Yale graduate who during his career was a teacher, professor, clergyman, and physician. Like Adams he studied at Andover Theological Seminary. He also turned to teaching in the South due to health problems. While at the College of Charleston, he authored a volume of 10 sermons titled *The Essentials of Religion* (1827). He presumably taught from Paley's textbook *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) as did Adams, since it was used at both Yale and Brown when Dickson and Adams were respectively students at those institutions.

who journeyed from Harvard in 1819 to become the minister of the Second Independent Church in Charleston. He was a self-conscious disciple of the first generation Unitarian patriarchs: Channing, Henry Ware, President Kirkland of Harvard. He was also a man of cosmopolitan sympathies who admired the social reforms of Dorothea Dix during a period when most Unitarians were social conservatives and appreciated the Biblical scholarship of Moses Stuart at Andover despite his polemic against liberalism. For a period Gilman also spent an hour every morning with Jasper Adams, the Episcopal president of Charleston College, reading German Biblical criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Years later Gilman recalled of his reading with Adams:

In consideration of his multiplied avocations through the day, and his liabilities to interruption at night, we were compelled to fix upon the hour between five and six o'clock in the morning. Accordingly, as he lived in my neighbourhood, I visited his house every morning at that hour, summer and winter, for about two years. I always found him at his post, awaiting my arrival, with his fire glowing and his candle burning, in the short and gloomy winter mornings. The next hour, from six to seven, he was occupied in his President's room, at the Charleston College, preparing for his tasks with his pupils, and then returned home to his breakfast, while his less indomitable fellow-student was constrained to yield himself up, during the same hour, to his interrupted slumbers. I mention this to show the iron application and persevering habits of the man. I have no doubt that it was characteristic of his course throughout the whole period of his manhood.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978), 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> Gilman, 644.

Yet Adams also was a practical man, and as a moral philosopher one of his favorite practical means by which to achieve a higher moral standard was the Sunday School system. In an 1830 address to the Charleston Protestant Episcopal Sunday School Society, he said:

The general diffusion of knowledge, with the various advantages which it confers, may be regarded as the principal characteristic of modern times...The system of Sunday School instruction, is understood to embrace no larger portion of the elements of ordinary learning than is necessary or useful in communicating religious truth; and this circumstance admonishes me, that my observations must be chiefly confined to the moral and religious influence which this system has exerted, and promises still more extensively to exert. The system must ultimately produce mighty effects, and it is, therefore, in the highest degree desirable, that its influence may be so directed, that any possible evil may be avoided, and all possible good may be obtained.<sup>12</sup>

Given a free hand and stronger support, Adams's second administration rapidly improved conditions. Enrollment, which had dropped from 190 when he left to 119, soon rose to 220, though as always a large share were preparatory or grammar students. J. H. Easterby writes: "By 1832 the building debt had been paid, tuition fees were yielding \$12,000, and a permanent fund had been set aside of approximately \$20,000."<sup>13</sup>

During Adams's second presidency, the College of Charleston grew in stature. Nonetheless, one of his greatest frustrations was the continuing refusal of the trustees to seize opportunities. In his first

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<sup>12</sup> Jasper Adams, "An Address, delivered on Whitsun Tuesday, 1830, being the Anniversary of the Charleston Protestant Episcopal Sunday School Society," *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* 7, 81 (Sept. 1830), 257-258.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Easterby, *A History of the College of Charleston* (Charleston: Trustees of the College of Charleston, 1935), 84.

administration, the physicians of Charleston appealed to the College of Charleston to add a medical school. The trustees declined, and the physicians in 1833 created a Medical College of the State of South Carolina that soon thrived. In Adams's second administration, there was a brief period when the State-supported South Carolina College [now University of South Carolina] in Columbia fell upon hard times. The trustees at Charleston were reluctant to take advantage of this opportunity to aggressively compete for prospective or current Columbia students. South Carolina College soon recovered, and the opportunity to recruit students was lost.

Adams evidently was further frustrated, perhaps angered, because so few of the College's trustees sent their own sons to study there, selecting South Carolina College or more prestigious northern colleges and universities instead. Even boys who began their studies at Charleston often would go to those other institutions for their final year(s) of study and degree. This set an example that residents of Charleston and vicinity could not fail to notice and therefore withheld patronage from the College. Moreover, trustees often interfered with the College faculty's attempts at student discipline, to the extent that an unruly student knew he could misbehave and find a trustee who would intercede. Finally, at least one trustee spread abroad his opinion that Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, core subjects taught at the College, were of little if any importance. Trustee support again was waning.

Enrollment gradually fell to 177 in 1833 and 140 in 1834. However, at the annual commencement in 1834, Adams strived to inspire graduates of the College with a forward-looking and optimistic baccalaureate address, titled "Characteristics of the Present Century." In one of his most prescient speeches, tracing the recent developments and prospects in a progressive young American nation, he told the 14 graduates and the attending audience:

Thus it is, ever has been, and must ever continue to be; -- the works of nature are inexhaustible in their extent and in their relations to each other; the sciences now known will continue to advance, and others will spring up, crowning life with the conveniences, comforts and elegancies, which it is their office to dispense with so liberal a hand...But there is another characteristic of the present age, still more interesting, and still more

encouraging than any to which I have before adverted. At no period since the days of the Apostles and their immediate successors, have exertions, equally energetic and successful, been made for the moral and spiritual welfare of mankind...Such, young gentlemen, are the characteristics of the age to which you belong, and in which you are to act a part...The great causes of literature, of science, of public and private morals, of good government and of pure religion, will all have claims upon your attention and cooperation. The advancement of these great interests, is equally essential to our national honour and national happiness.<sup>14</sup>

At this time the financial affairs of the College were in such disarray that its account books were incomplete, a loan had to be obtained to pay College faculty salaries, and Easterby states: "An investigation a few months later produced little results other than a frank denunciation of the trustees by the faculty...In August [1836], there were only seventeen students, and all of the faculty except Mr. Adams had resigned." Easterby indicates: "Several attempts to define the respective spheres of the faculty and of the board had been unsuccessful. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that a conflict of authority should occur." Prospects for the College were exceedingly bleak, and finally Adams resigned.<sup>15</sup>

During the years from 1826 to 1836, 65 students graduated from the College of Charleston. Easterby recounts: "Their records in later life would have pleased any college president. The majority entered the professions: 17 became clergymen, 14 physicians, 10 lawyers, and 4 teachers." The irascible John Charles Fremont, who once was expelled but received his bachelor's and master's degrees in 1836, became famous

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<sup>14</sup> Jasper Adams, *Characteristics of the Present Century: A Baccalaureate Address to the Graduates of the College of Charleston, So. Ca., Delivered in St. Paul's Church, at the Annual Commencement, 31st October, 1834* (Charleston: Burgess & Honour, 1836), 7, 9, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Easterby, 89, 86.

as an intrepid explorer of the American West and candidate for the nation's presidency.<sup>16</sup>

The conflict between trustees and faculty during the Adams presidencies, and the detrimental effects that ensued, over time resulted in some beneficial clarification and resolution of their respective roles at the College of Charleston. Easterby says that later: "The trustees of this period were more than zealous guardians of the material welfare of the College." Moreover, "Even Doctor Adams in his most plaintive mood would not have asked for a greater degree of autonomy...faculty journals beginning with 1841 (the earliest that are extant) furnish ample evidence of the forbearance of the trustees to interfere with matters of internal management."<sup>17</sup>

In 1835, as the College enrollment and demands on his time declined, Adams accepted the rectorship of St. Andrew's Parish near Charleston while continuing to perform the limited role of College president. St. Andrew's was a small parish and, after resigning from the College of Charleston in 1836, Adams stayed at St. Andrew's where he had more time to devote to writing.

Most notably Adams's writing resulted in publication of his nearly 500-page textbook *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1837). Adams dedicated his book to Josiah Quincy, President of Harvard University, who during the book's completion opened all the facilities of Harvard to Adams. This gave Adams ready access to the rich and extensive resources of the Harvard Library and the wise counsel of superb scholars. Adams wrote the book's preface, dated September 4, 1837, while in Cambridge.

The terms of the Horry benefaction included Horry's desire that the professor of moral and political philosophy write books within the purview of the grant. With all the demands on Adams's time as president, he was unable to complete even one book while in office. However, he was thinking, lecturing, and writing along these lines. His *The Relation of Christianity to Civil Government in the United States* (1833), which combined moral and political philosophy, ran to 56 pages in its first edition and 64 pages in its revised second edition. His *Laws of Success and Failure in Life* (1833), a treatise on moral philosophy,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 119, 121-122.

reached 52 pages. His *Moral Causes of the Welfare of Nations* (1834), again confined to moral philosophy, reached 40 pages. He also authored the 26-page *An Eulogium...on the Life and Character of the Late Elias Horry, Esq.* (1835), his benefactor who established the Horry professorship in moral and political philosophy [Horry died September 17, 1834]. One might extract, therefore, at least 100 pages of thought on moral philosophy alone, written and published while Adams was president at Charleston. From his lecture notes and these listed writings, he could have published at least a small book by 1835; instead he chose to wait and develop a fuller treatment.

Moreover, in 1836 the literary press was encouraging Adams to produce more voluminously. The editors of *The Southern Literary Journal and Magazine of Arts* wrote:

It is probably not known generally to the American public, though such is the fact, that the gentleman, to whose merits we pay this incidental tribute, is one of the most diligent students, and, what is more, one of the most accomplished scholars, in the United States...Dr. Adams has put forth no voluminous works, but his occasional publications, elicited by his connection with the pulpit, and his Presidency of the Charleston College, evince of what he is capable.<sup>18</sup>

To fulfill the obligation as best he could, Adams devoted much of his first year out of office to completing and bringing his *Elements of Moral Philosophy* to publication. Just as Adams was a practical man, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* was a practical book and thereby a uniquely valuable contribution to nineteenth century American thought on moral philosophy. As D. H. Meyer writes: "Faith in God, said Jasper Adams, and in 'his superintending Providence, is alike the foundation of morals and religion,' and the 'deep sense of God' is 'the root and branch of practical morals.'"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Anon., "Orations and Addresses by J. Adams, D.D.," *The Southern Literary Journal and Magazine of Arts* 2, 2 (Apr. 1836), 159.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, 26.

Writers on moral philosophy tended, almost without exception, to treat both “theoretical ethics” and “practical ethics.” However, Meyer points out “Jasper Adams impatiently dismissed the theoretical questions altogether. ‘It is the object of moral philosophy,’ he announced, not to belabor subtle points of doctrine, but ‘to investigate the moral constitution of man and the appropriate sphere of his duties.’”<sup>20</sup>

Adams sought to improve on Paley’s *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, which he studied at Brown University and from which he taught at Charleston. With the passage of time, Paley’s thought was increasingly held to be in error and Holifield writes, “The source of his error was clear to James H. Thornwell: ‘Human consciousness is a territory which he never entered.’” To most moral philosophers, this meant that Paley inadequately understood the workings of the human mind.<sup>21</sup>

To Adams, the workings of the human mind were still deficient as a basis for moral philosophy unless they included an understanding of the mind of Christ. This is why he strongly supported the Sunday School movement, sound preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and deep study of the Bible. Adams said: “Religious instruction is viewed by our Church, as the means of forming the Christian character, the sustenance by which the Christian life is nourished from the period of infancy, until, in mature years, the young Christian becomes informed of the doctrines of the Christian system, and sensible of the duties of the Christian life, and of the responsibilities attached to the Christian profession.” Probably no American writer of a book on moral philosophy devoted closer attention to the duty of forgiveness, for example, than did Adams.<sup>22</sup>

The Rev. Charles C. Pinckney, Jr., rector of Grace Church in Charleston who studied at the College for six years under Adams, wrote of Adams’s book: “Its object is to place morals more clearly than Paley has done on a Christian basis. It is on this work chiefly that Dr. Adams’ claims to high intellectual distinction must rest with posterity.” How far Adams succeeded is attested to by U.S. Supreme Court justice the Hon. Joseph Story, who wrote to him:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> Holifield, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, *An Address*; 261; Adams, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 270-304.



It appears to me to be an exceedingly valuable addition to our present literature on Moral Philosophy, and to possess a peculiar excellence in the fulness and comprehensiveness of its practical views and precepts. In this respect it is far superior to any treatise that has fallen under my observation. I have been also much gratified by its blending the precepts of Christianity with those derivable from natural justice, and also with the illustrations which you have drawn from the moral precepts of our municipal jurisprudence -- a source of information which has been hitherto neglected.

Wilson Smith wrote that "Adams' *Elements of Moral Philosophy*...made a sincere effort to distinguish moral philosophy from absolute moral theology," and the result was a well-balanced blend of Christian ideals into moral philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

While moral and political philosophy were generally treated as one subject, Adams treated them as separate, though not distinctly so. He felt that moral philosophy dealt with man in his individual capacity; political philosophy dealt with man in his public capacities. In his preface he indicates the manuscript of his political philosophy book, on the constitutional history of the United States, was nearly completed; regrettably, it was not published.

Meyer observes that Adams "gave special attention to the conscience, which he considered to be the supreme moral authority -- that is, the most reliable means of understanding the dictates of God's moral law." To Adams, God was the arbiter of each individual's conscience.<sup>24</sup>

Even so, each individual lives under the rule of laws made by society. Meyer writes: "The right of revolution cannot be gainsaid, Jasper Adams admitted; but would-be revolutionaries must make their decision 'under the weight of the most solemn responsibility to God, their country, and

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<sup>23</sup> Charles C. Pinckney, Jr., "Jasper Adams," in *Annals of the American Pulpit*..., 643; William B. Sprague, *Ibid.*, 642; Wilson Smith, *Professors & Public Ethics*, 195 fn20.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, 148.

mankind.”<sup>25</sup>

Of necessity Adams’s book had to devote some attention to jurisprudence. Not being trained in law Adams went as far as he could into jurisprudence, with the advice of legal scholars whom he acknowledges, among them Mr. Justice Story (also Dane Professor of Law at Harvard), and Simon Greenleaf (Royall Professor of Law at Harvard).

Though Mr. Justice Story was pleased to see that Adams drew information from municipal jurisprudence while other writers on moral philosophy ignored it, this does not mean that Adams always used that information correctly. In so doing Adams made an arguable distinction:

It is the end of jurisprudence to prescribe rules for the decisions of judges and arbiters. It is the end of morals to prescribe rules for the conduct of a good man...The science of morality is to be considered as furnishing direction to persons who are conscious of their own thoughts, motives, and designs; rather than as a guide to the judge, or to any third person, whose arbitration must proceed upon rules of evidence and maxims of credibility with which the moralist has no concern.

One could argue that Adams would have been more accurate had he said “varying degrees of concern.”<sup>26</sup>

Adams’s book met with mixed reviews, for odd and assorted reasons, some of the criticism aimed at his handling of jurisprudence. The latter criticism was not entirely fair, and Adams may be excused, since in the United States jurisprudence was slow to develop as an academic field of study. In a new nation, there was comparatively little settled law.

The most understandable criticism was along sectional lines. The book presents Christian ideals placed within the context of southern culture and values, including a defense of slavery not as a temporary but as a permanent condition of some segment of humanity. He seemingly took slavery for granted as part of the history of civilization. Yet in his preface Adams holds: “The science of practical morals is not

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, *Elements*, 30.

stationary, much less is it incapable of advancement. Like other sciences it depends to a certain degree on experience, and successive writers ought to aim to collect and register in their works the well matured results of experience." So saying, he seemed to allow for, if not advocate, the gradual abolition of slavery. This is not greatly different from the positions taken by moral philosophers in the north, few of whom urged immediate abolition.<sup>27</sup>

Adams's book was greeted most favorably by an anonymous reviewer in *Southern Rose*: "This work deserves to be made a manual for every family in the country. It is impossible to rise from its perusal without being better and more enlightened. It presents a comprehensive view of the whole duty of man, vivified and illustrated by examples of immediate and contemporary interest. In fact, it takes up the science of morals at *the present point* of its progress, and carries the latest and best speculations of the divine and the philosopher into every department of practical life." Suffice it to say that reviewers in other sections of the nation, who did not appreciate southern culture nor share southern values, were less fulsome in their praise.<sup>28</sup>

Adams had studied his personal concept of moral philosophy extensively. His book was valuable not only for his own originality of thought, but also for compiling into one work so much needful food for thought on man in his individual capacity, written by authors before Adams. If one were to find fault with the book, it might be that Adams did not fully digest this cornucopia. It would appear that Adams ran out of time he felt he could allot to completing the book, with the result that despite his best intentions and with aid he was unable to thoroughly interpret some difficult material such as jurisprudence.<sup>29</sup>

On the matter of relations between people, which is central to Adams's moral philosophy, he had more acute insights. E. Brooks Holifield writes that "Adams introduced his *Elements of Moral*

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Jasper Adams, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Folsom, Wells, and Thurston, 1837), 168-175, x.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., "Review of Adams's *Elements of Moral Philosophy*," *Southern Rose* 6, 7 (Nov. 25, 1837), 108.

<sup>29</sup> For illustrations of the usefulness of Adams's book, see the index in D. H. Meyer's *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (1972).

*Philosophy* (1837) with the observation that moral science had two objects: to form and cultivate the 'sense' of duty and to determine the obligations implicit in 'the various situations and relations of life.'...The category of relation could easily become a cipher for 'office, birth, knowledge, wealth, and other distinctions known and acknowledged among men,' to which Jasper Adams accorded the sanction of providence on the grounds that no community had ever existed without them." Adams, while immersed in the study of books, had nearly 20 years of personal experience with the relations governing early American higher education.<sup>30</sup>

J. McKeen Cattell reports: "In general the trustees of the primitive American college were competent to administer its simple economy. But even then there were difficulties. Before the American Institute of Instruction meeting in Worcester, Mass., in 1837, the Rev. Jasper Adams, president of Charleston College, gave a lecture on 'The relations subsisting between the board of trustees and the faculty of the university,' stating that as far as he knew this had never been the subject of special investigation." This came at a time when conflicts over academic authority and control were becoming increasingly troublesome, as so many educational institutions had been established since the colonial era.<sup>31</sup>

Adams spoke at length on the causes of difficulties, particularly the interference of trustees with the rights and duties of faculty. He drew heavily from personal experience and that of other academicians whom he contacted. His *Elements of Moral Philosophy* provided his analytical framework for reflecting on the nature of the relations between ruler and ruled, which was the issue when he gave his penetrating paper examining the relations between trustees and faculty. He told those listening at

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<sup>30</sup> Holifield, 146-147.

<sup>31</sup> J. McKeen Cattell, *University Control* (New York: The Science Press, 1913), 26; Jasper Adams, "On the Relation Subsisting Between the Board of Trustees and the Faculty of a University, &," Lecture VI, *The Introductory Discourse, and the Lectures Delivered Before the American Institute of Instruction, at Worcester, (Mass.), August, 1837, Including the Journal of Proceedings, and a List of Officers* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1838), 141-158; published separately as Jasper Adams, *A Lecture Delivered Before the American Institute of Instruction, at Worcester, Massachusetts, August 29, 1837* (Boston: I. R. Butts, 1837).

Worcester that many a qualified college faculty, who felt able to elevate their college's status and secure greater public support, had been thwarted by their board of trustees. Carefully made plans for improvement had been presented to the trustees for consideration and hoped-for approval, only to be met by cold indifference, ignored, and rejected. The trustees often did not understand the plans, nor seek to, and wasted little time in rejecting them. Favorable opportunities for improvement were allowed to pass by, lost, and not to return, due to inaction by the trustees. The faculty had the choice to let things stand or to resign. The result, in either case, was to the detriment, even ruin, of the college.

In summarizing, Adams argued that the responsibility of trustees should be limited to the original organization of the institution; managing the institution's funds; appointing new professors with advice and consent of the existing faculty; and sustaining the faculty by their countenance and encouragement. The faculty should be responsible for the course of study including selection of textbooks, mode of instruction, and discipline.

Adams remained at St. Andrew's Parish near Charleston until 1838 when he accepted another high calling, that of chaplain and professor of geography, history, and ethics at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. One may assume he taught ethics from his own *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1837), as its Christian ideals much outweighed its sectional orientation.

In 1840 Adams resigned and again relocated his family to South Carolina, this time to an estate at Pendleton. There he occasionally supplied an Episcopal congregation's vacant pulpit, while planning to organize and operate a large Episcopal school. Lamentably, before the school could be firmly established under his guidance, he died from typhoid fever on October 25, 1841, in Pendleton where he is buried. On his gravestone are engraved the following lines from Lucretius in Latin, translated: "The fatherland is seen to have had nothing in it more eminent than this man, nor anything more holy, admirable or beloved."<sup>32</sup>

In closing, the Massachusetts Yankee, Jasper Adams, holding forth mainly in the court of Charleston, South Carolina, deserves to be best

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel L. Dreisbach, ed., *Religion and Politics in the Early Republic: Jasper Adams and the Church-State Debate* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 167.

remembered for the totality of his contributions to early southern and American higher education. One should concur with Harris Elwood Starr, who wrote that Adams “was a good scholar, an unusually able administrator, and a man of great practical wisdom, energy, and determination, but a frail constitution necessitated his living in the South, where he worked under conditions which did not afford opportunity and recognition commensurate with his abilities.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Harris Elwood Starr, “Adams, Jasper,” *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. I, Allen Johnson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 72.