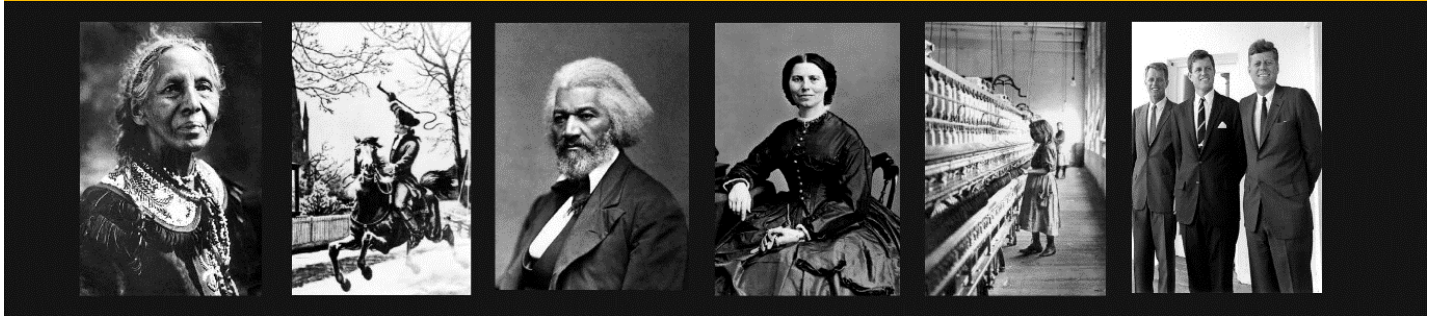


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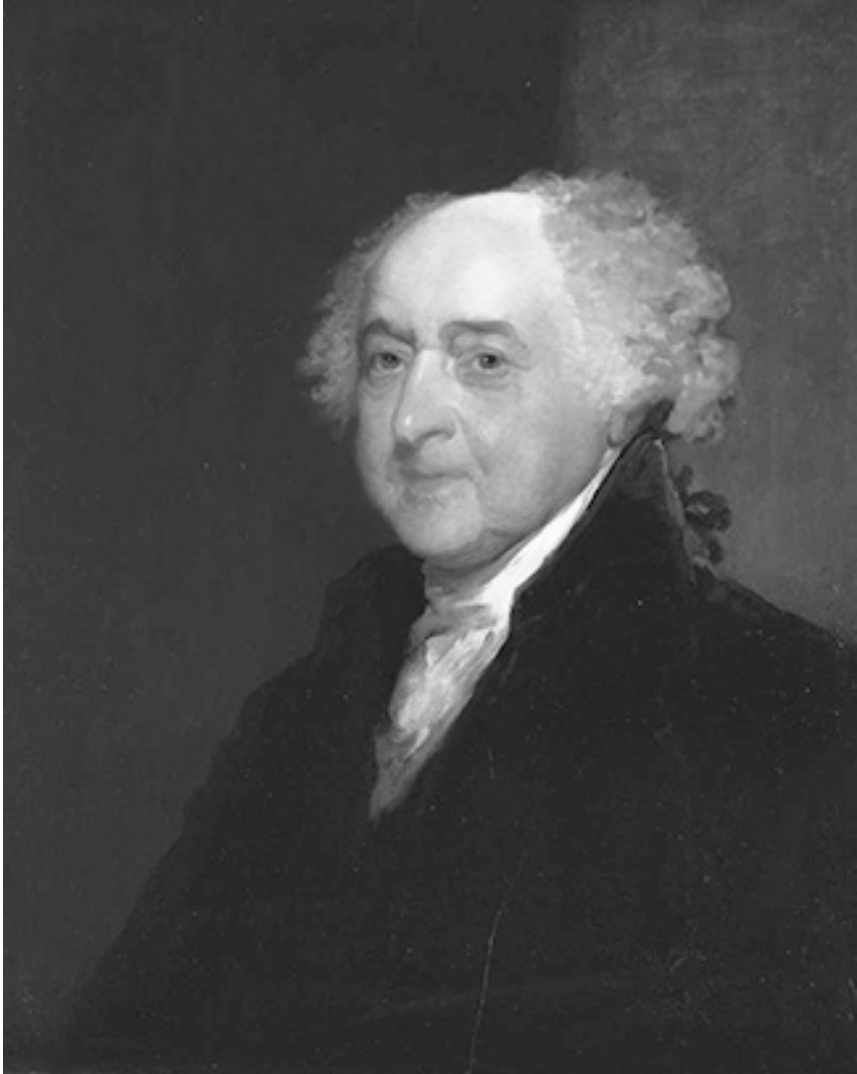


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**John Adams**

Portrait by Gilbert Stuart, c. 1815

# John Adams, Political Moderation, and the 1820 Massachusetts Constitutional Convention: A Reappraisal

ARTHUR SCHERR



**Editor's Introduction:** *The history of religious freedom in Massachusetts is long and contentious. In 1833, Massachusetts was the last state in the nation to “disestablish” taxation and state support for churches.<sup>1</sup> What, if any, impact did John Adams have on this process of liberalization? What were Adams’ views on religious freedom and how did they change over time? In this intriguing article Dr. Arthur Scherr traces the evolution, or lack thereof, in Adams’ views on religious freedom from the writing of the original 1780 Massachusetts Constitution to its revision in 1820. He carefully examines contradictory primary and secondary sources and seeks to set the record straight, arguing that there are many unsupported myths and misconceptions about Adams’ role at the 1820 convention.*

*Although he played a minor role in 1820, in 1780 John Adams had almost single-handedly drafted the state’s first constitution. The 1780 Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the world’s oldest functioning written*

*constitution. Before examining Adams' religious beliefs it is necessary to briefly review its history and the evolution of religious law in Massachusetts.*

*Congregational or Congregationalist churches are Protestant churches practicing congregationalist church governance in which each congregation, independently and autonomously, runs its own affairs. Although the Puritans, New England's original Congregationalists, believed in an institutional separation of church and state, they also believed that Church and State had both been created by God to enforce his will on Earth. In 1631, the Massachusetts General Court decreed that only Congregationalists could vote and serve in politics. In 1638, the legislature ordered a tax on all who did not voluntarily contribute to the Congregationalist minister's support. In 1672, the General Assembly ordered banishment for "broaching and maintaining damnable heresies," which essentially constituted anything contrary to the teachings of the established church.<sup>2</sup>*

*Although toleration was extended to all Protestant Christians in 1691, it did not extend to Roman Catholics. A 1692 act required every town to support, through taxation, a system of public worship and an "able, learned orthodox minister."<sup>3</sup> Although not officially an "established" church, and despite frequent changes to the law, for practical purposes the result was "a series of territorial parishes whose boundaries were coterminous with those of the towns."<sup>4</sup> During the eighteenth century, new religious groups sought to expand religious freedom but church establishment remained intact.<sup>5</sup>*

*After independence was declared, the colonies quickly moved to write their own state constitutions. In September 1779, the elected delegates selected John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin to serve on the drafting committee and "the other two picked [John] Adams to draw up the state's constitution."<sup>6</sup> He had become, as he later wrote, "a Sub Subcommittee of one."<sup>7</sup>*

*One of the most contentious issues was whether the state would support religion financially. Advocating such a policy—on the grounds that religion was necessary for public happiness, prosperity, and order—were the ministers and most members of the Congregational Church, while Baptists, Quakers, and others argued that churches should receive no support from the state.<sup>8</sup> A compromise was achieved: the new constitution authorized a general religious tax to be directed to the church of one's choice (Article III).*

*The Massachusetts Constitution, primarily drafted by Adams and ratified in 1780, contains three parts: a preamble, a "Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants," and a "Frame of Government" section. Articles I, II, III, and X from the Declaration of Rights are reprinted here, as they are crucial to understanding this article. Although Article II recognized freedom of conscience and one's right to*

worship God “in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience,” Article III states that the state legislature has the right to “authorize and require” provisions for the “public worship of God and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality.”<sup>9</sup> By interpreting the Baptists and Methodists and their itinerant preachers as unincorporated religious groups, the Federalist Congregationalist religious establishment forced them to contribute to the Congregationalist Church until the eleventh amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1833.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tendency over the last twenty years or so among historians and the general public to see one of Massachusetts’ greatest citizens, the second president, John Adams, more favorably has manifested itself in the popularity of big biographies of Founding Fathers, dubbed by a *Newsweek* editorialist as “Founders’ chic.”<sup>10</sup> In Adams’ case, it began with Joseph J. Ellis’s *Passionate Sage* in 1993, and perhaps reached its zenith with David McCullough’s award-winning, voluminous popular biography, *John Adams* (2001). The literate reading public, forgiving Adams’ support for the Alien and Sedition Acts and his stiff-necked Puritanism, now views him as a warm, cuddly fellow, especially when they consider his loving relationship with his charming, feisty, outspoken, supposedly proto-feminist wife Abigail. This trend exploded onto the small screen in Paul Giamatti’s superlative performance as “John Adams” on HBO in 2008.<sup>11</sup>

The strong applause for Adams has trickled down to the scholarly journals. There has even been an effort to depict him as a supporter of religious freedom, at least in his old age, as well as Unitarianism, a faith which he, in fact, praised occasionally during his last years.<sup>12</sup> I myself was caught up in this error. In an article in 2007 in the journal *The Historian*, for example, I made various undocumented claims about Adams’ religious liberalism. Arguing that Adams was growing closer to Thomas Jefferson’s advocacy of absolute freedom of religion, I asserted that at the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1820, Adams “proposed to repeal the third article of the Massachusetts bill of rights, which had established Congregationalism as a tax-supported religion.” However, except for quoting a letter from Jefferson to Adams, dated January 22, 1821, which praised Adams’ “labors” at the convention, I, like several other scholars, included no source for these statements.<sup>13</sup>

In another article about James Monroe’s relationship with Adams, I had similarly (and mistakenly) emphasized Adams’ support for religious freedom.

## **1780 Massachusetts Constitution: A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants**

(emphasis added, Articles I-III and X only)

Article I. *All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights*; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.

Article II. *It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly and at stated seasons, to worship the Supreme Being*, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe. And no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of *his own conscience*, or for his religious profession or sentiments, provided he doth not disturb the public peace or obstruct others in their religious worship.

Article III. As the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend upon *piety, religion, and morality*, and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community but by the institution of the *public worship of God and of the public instructions in piety, religion, and morality*: Therefore, to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a *right to invest their legislature* with power to authorize and require . . . several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic or religious societies to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the *public worship of God and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety,*

I asserted that, at the Constitutional Convention of 1820-1821, Adams demanded separation of church and state and tried to replace Article III of the Massachusetts Constitution with a provision for religious freedom. I further argued that Adams was in “a pathetic minority” on the issue and met defeat. Although it rejected Adams’ purported proposal for religious freedom, the Convention had extended the vote to all male taxpayers, which he had opposed. Nonetheless, I wrote at that time that Adams retained hope that constitutional government would eventually succeed in Europe, that he asserted that religious freedom would advance in the United States, and that he continually eulogized freedom of thought without which, as he put in a

*religion, and morality* in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

And the people of this commonwealth have also a right to, and do, invest their legislature with *authority to enjoin upon all the subject an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid, at stated times and seasons*, if there be any on whose instructions they can conscientiously and conveniently attend.

*Provided, notwithstanding*, That the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic, or religious societies, shall at all times have the exclusive right and electing their public teachers and of contracting with them for their support and maintenance.

And all moneys paid by the subject to the support of public worship and of public teachers aforesaid shall, if he require it, be uniformly applied to the support of the public teacher or teachers of his own religious sect or denomination, provided there be any on whose instructions he attends; otherwise it may be paid toward the support of the teacher or teachers of the parish or precinct in which the said moneys are raised.

*And every denomination of Christians, demeaning themselves peaceably and as good subjects of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law; and no subordination of any sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law.*

Article X. *Every individual of the society has a right to be protected by it in the enjoyment of his life, liberty, and property, according to standing laws.* He is obliged, consequently, to contribute his share to expense of this protection; to give his personal service, or an equivalent, when necessary; but no part of the property of any individual can, with justice, be taken from him, or applied to public uses, without his own consent, or that of the representative body of the people. . . .

letter to Jefferson in 1825, “the human mind must make an awkward and clumsy progress in its investigations.”<sup>14</sup>

I reached this conclusion based on surprisingly superficial research, from a perusal of Gilbert Chinard’s old but generally reliable biography, *Honest John Adams* (1933). In a cursory account of Adams’ attendance at the 1820-21 Constitutional Convention, Chinard states that Adams:

was more pleased with himself than he dared admit, for he proposed that the third article of the Bill of Rights be amended so as to do away with the recognition of distinct modes of religious



faith by the State. It was to some extent a parallel of the bill for religious freedom proposed by Jefferson some fifty [sic] years before.<sup>15</sup>

It is not clear where Chinard obtained his information, since he did not footnote this sentence, although he mentions that the convention rejected Adams' (alleged) motion and, according to his grandson Charles Francis Adams' *Life of Adams*, it was "gently put aside." When we turn to *Life of Adams*, we find that this statement is the source of Chinard's information:

There was one change in the old Constitution which Mr. Adams labored, though ineffectually, to procure. It was a modification of the third article of the Bill of Rights, an article which he did not himself draw [write] when he furnished the rest [i.e. according to his much later statements about his role in composing the 1780 Constitution], in such form as would do away with the recognition of distinct modes of religious faith by the State.<sup>16</sup>

This unspecified provision that Adams supposedly introduced apparently never saw the light of day. Unaware that Adams was no longer present at the convention by this time, but had gone home because of illness, the grandson continues:

This amendment had been suggested by Dr. [Richard] Price in his comments upon the Constitution, published soon after it was made, though it is not likely that Mr. Adams remembered it. Not able to make his voice clearly heard by the members, he had recourse to the agency of others to effect his object; but it was in vain.<sup>17</sup>

The grandson then adds the following, suggesting that Adams was in the progressive minority, his purported proposal for religious freedom allegedly stymied by a reactionary Puritanism:

The old Puritan feeling which began with laboring to establish a Christian Commonwealth, was yet alive, and refused to recognize Jews or heathens as perfect equals with Christians before the law. The proposition was gently put aside; the spirit of it has, however, since found its way, by the operation of an amendment, into the system of government.<sup>18</sup>



However, Charles Francis Adams does not provide any source for this information; perhaps he learned about it on his grandfather's knee or from family lore. For the historian, however, it appears that the most commonly-quoted evidence for Adams' devotion to religious freedom remains essentially hearsay.

In 1962, in what is still probably the best biography of John Adams, the prolific historian Page Smith noted Adams' pride that his hometown of Quincy had unanimously chosen him its representative at the 1820 convention. However, Smith's brief account makes no mention of his actions on behalf of religious freedom, only noting that he opposed eliminating the property qualification for male voters.<sup>19</sup> More recently, major biographies of Adams continue to gloss over his activities at the 1820-1821 convention, while simultaneously tending to exaggerate his role.<sup>20</sup> Joseph J. Ellis's sprightly account of Adams' last years, his much-praised *Passionate Sage*, does not even mention his election, first as a delegate and then as president of the Convention, nominally the high point of his last years. Nor does Ellis mention the Convention in his more recent study of John and Abigail.<sup>21</sup>

As far as is known, Adams did not make any speeches on religious freedom at the convention. In his popular Pulitzer-prize winning biography *John Adams* (2001), David McCullough quotes an apocryphal, unsourced speech that Adams purportedly made advocating religious freedom, claiming that it was considered "very remarkable" for its energy and conviction. Indeed, McCullough goes further, claiming that Adams offered an amendment guaranteeing complete religious freedom, apparently unaware that Adams left the convention early because of illness. McCullough continues, "As he believed that all were equal before God, so he believed that all should be free to worship God as they pleased. In particular, he wanted religious freedom for Jews." This claim cannot be based on anything Adams did at the Convention; instead, it probably stemmed from a letter Adams wrote two years earlier, in July 1818, to New York Jewish editor and politician Mordecai Noah, who had asked him to support civil rights for Jews. This private letter, which merely stated that he wished the Jewish people well, was unconnected with his later activities at the Convention, although McCullough misleadingly seems to imply the contrary.<sup>22</sup> McCullough further notes that "his amendment failed to pass," probably a reference to an amendment Isaac Parker, the Convention's president, introduced on Adams' behalf that did not specifically provide for religious freedom or abolish the established church.<sup>23</sup>

Discussing the aftermath of Adams' alleged failure to secure religious freedom at the Convention, McCullough adds, "to young Josiah Quincy, who came by frequently to visit, Adams spoke with regret of the intolerance

of Christians.” Quincy was a young man and son of a major Federalist politician. His memoir, *Figures of the Past*, which McCullough cites, mentions his visit to Adams’ home on August 18, 1822, nearly two years after the Convention. At that time, he recalled that Adams, taking a break from telling “his pleasant stories . . . complained of the intolerance of Christians, and thought that the old Roman system of permitting every man to worship how and what he pleased was the true one.” Sounding more and more like Jefferson, with whom he had disagreed in earlier years over whether an atheist could be a decent person, Adams told Quincy:

He liked the opinion of Justin Martyr that every honest, well-disposed, moral man, even if he were an atheist, should be accounted a Christian. He said that for nearly eighty years most of his leisure moments had been spent in examining the various religions of the world, and that this was the conclusion he had come to.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to McCullough’s interpretation, Quincy’s memoir does not indicate that Adams attempted to overthrow the established church at the convention. Moreover, Quincy went on to emphasize that Adams was more devout than this atypical, offhand remark condoning atheism might suggest. Quincy himself noted that “It is scarcely necessary to say that random conversational utterances . . . are not to be taken as the measure of a great man’s thought on the most solemn of all subjects [i.e., religion] . . . Mr. Adams always professed himself a Christian, and was a constant attendant at church.”<sup>25</sup>

Unlike most deists and freethinkers, Adams sincerely believed in immortality. He told Quincy that after his death he expected to be reunited with his loved ones; he thought he would meet his great historical predecessors for the first time.<sup>26</sup> The evidence provided by Quincy’s memoir adds little to McCullough’s brief and unconvincing account of Adams’ alleged fight for religious liberty at the convention.<sup>27</sup>

In a one-volume biography on a scale similar to McCullough’s popular work, the financial analyst James Grant wrote in *John Adams: Party of One* (2006) concerning the convention: “The sessions were long and tiring. Adams said little but spoke in support of a pair of losing causes, one reactionary, the other daringly progressive.” The latter was Adams’ alleged courageous proposal for complete religious freedom. In contrast, he took a “reactionary” stance in opposition to democratic proposals to expand the suffrage to all taxpaying males and abolish property qualifications for office. The convention

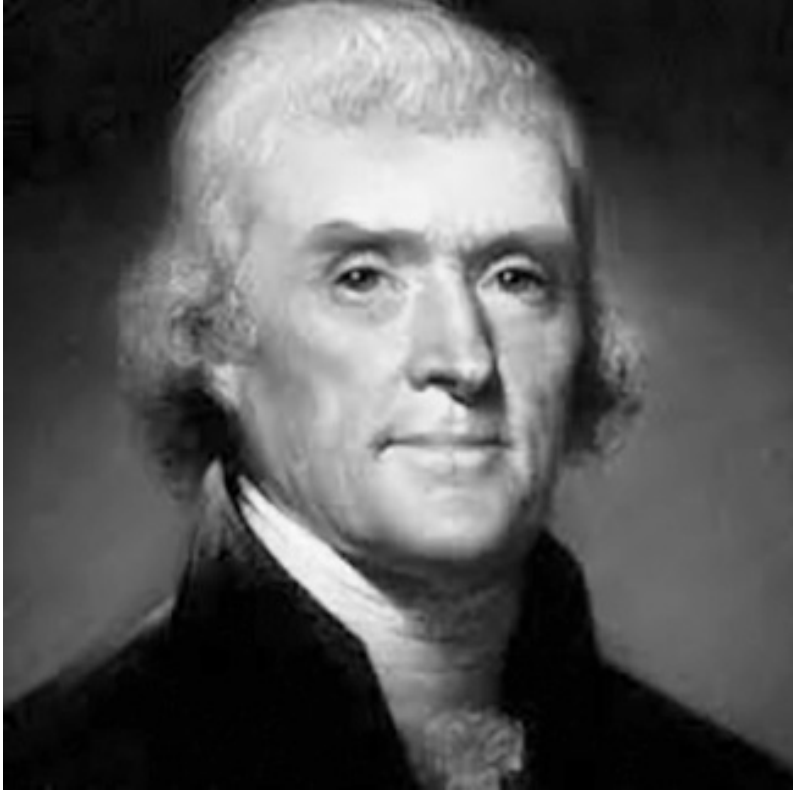
voted against his positions on both questions. Like McCullough, Grant asserts that Adams sponsored a constitutional amendment guaranteeing equal protection under the law for “all men of all religions,” including Jews.<sup>28</sup>

However, such an unremarkable statement of protection under the laws was already in the state constitution; and Adams’ alleged proposal did not suggest disestablishing the Congregational Church, which would have maintained its privileged position. Grant continues, “The amended constitution broadened the state’s support to encompass all Christian denominations, not just the Protestant ones; it went no further. Adams, having come down with a fever, got the bad news in bed [in Quincy] at home. He remained flat on his back for weeks.”<sup>29</sup> Grant’s brief, sympathetic account provides no supporting or convincing evidence that Adams, who for much of the time was ill at home, vigorously argued for freedom of religion at the Convention.

### ADAMS-JEFFERSON CORRESPONDENCE

Overall, Adams’ religious views have received cursory, contradictory and misleading treatment by biographers and historians.<sup>30</sup> I turn next to Adams’ own writing and correspondence for clues to his evolving stance on religious freedom. In Adams’ view, for a government to have some kind of religious establishment was both inevitable and necessary. He believed that no state could maintain an attitude of genuine neutrality in matters of religion: to argue otherwise, as historian John Witte, Jr. puts it, was to uphold a “philosophical fiction.”<sup>31</sup> In his youth, Adams argued that the laws should punish acts of blasphemy and sacrilege, but as he aged, he claimed to oppose laws against blasphemy, at least when writing to his libertarian friend Jefferson.<sup>32</sup> In many ways, Adams’ religious faith for most of his life was that of an orthodox Puritan. He adhered to an established church not only to sustain law and order, but also to preserve Christian faith; held a pessimistic view of human nature; and maintained a fervid belief in personal immortality.

The correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson spanned half a century and embraced government, philosophy, religion, and the activities of daily life. They first met as delegates to the Continental Congress in 1775 and began writing letters in 1777. After Jefferson defeated Adams for the presidency in 1800, they became estranged and their correspondence lapsed until 1812. It then resumed until both of their deaths in 1826. Insisting that he had always been fond of Jefferson, Adams hinted to his friend Dr. Benjamin Rush that he might agree to exchange letters with the Virginian. Condescendingly referring to Jefferson as a naïve “Boy” compared to him



### **Thomas Jefferson**

Portrait by Rembrandt Peale, 1800

in the political arena, he wrote Rush, “I was his Preceptor on Politics and taught him every thing that has been good and solid in his whole Political Conduct.”<sup>33</sup>

Adams’ confidential letters derided Jefferson as a popularity-seeking demagogue of mediocre intellectual attainments. He tended to believe the unflattering charge that Jefferson had fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings, labeling it a horrid “Infamy. . . which will be remembered as long as Jefferson has Blotts in his Character.” But he considered it bad manners for Federalist pamphleteers to continually harp on this character flaw.<sup>34</sup> In letters to Jefferson after they had resumed their correspondence, he uninhibitedly criticized Jefferson’s policies as president, asserting that many critics considered his acts “weak, superficial, and short sighted.”<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, he greatly admired Jefferson's literary talents and social skills and was jealous of his political acumen and ability to court the masses.<sup>36</sup>

When they resumed their correspondence in old age, Adams remained somewhat envious of his old friend. He insisted that his own integrity and candor, expressed in writings on political theory that led his enemies to label him a monarchist, were the reasons that he had not done as well as Jefferson politically. His suspicions of popular rule, voiced in *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* (1787-1788) and *Discourses on Davila* (1790-1791), "laid the foundation of that immense Unpopularity, which fell like the Tower of Siloam upon me," he lectured Jefferson. "Your steady defence of democratical Principles, and your invariable favourable Opinion of the french [*sic*] Revolution laid the foundation of your Unbounded Popularity."<sup>37</sup> He resentfully assured Jefferson that "posterity" would harshly judge many of Jefferson's actions as president.<sup>38</sup> He tried to convince Jefferson that because his signature, as president of the Senate, was on the Alien Act of 1798 when it passed the upper house, he was as responsible for it as Adams was.<sup>39</sup> He also felt sincere affection for Jefferson, who had been his companion for several years in Europe during the 1780s, when he was lonely in monarchical Europe's capitals. As he wrote Jefferson frequently in closing his letters to him in old age, he was "one who has loved and esteemed you for Eight and thirty Years."<sup>40</sup>

In 1820 Jefferson probably learned of Adams' attendance at the Convention through the newspapers, since Adams' extant letters to him had not informed him in advance. Jefferson may have read about the Convention's repeal of the 1780 constitution's requirement that all elective officeholders be Christians and about its extension of the suffrage. However, his knowledge of the Convention seemed vague, and he did not specifically refer to Adams' activities there. He was most impressed that Adams was healthy enough to serve. "I was quite rejoiced, dear Sir, to see that you had health and spirits enough to take part in the late convention of your state for revising it's [*sic*] constitution, and to bear your share in it's debates and labors," Jefferson wrote. "The amendments of which we have as yet heard prove the advance of liberalism in the intervening period."<sup>41</sup> Adams' response stressed his frail health. He unfavorably compared the part he played in 1820 with his dominant role at the 1779 convention:

My appearance in the late convention was too ludicrous to be talked of. I was a member in the Convention of 1779, and there I was loquacious enough. I have harangued and scribbled more than my share, but from that time to the convention in 1820

I never opened my lips in a publick debate. . . . What I said I know not; I believe the Printers have made better speeches than I made for myself. Feeling my weakness, I attempted little and that seldom. What would I give for nerves as good as yours?<sup>42</sup>

In 1825 Adams wrote Jefferson a letter deploring laws that had arisen under the aegis of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which was in large part his creation, and expressed his hope for the repeal of statutes that incriminated as blasphemers those who doubted the divine inspiration of the Bible. Adams maintained that the “whole Christian world,” which retained laws punishing those who denied the divine inspiration of the Bible with torture or death (“by fire at the stake, at the rack, or the wheel”), required greater religious enlightenment.<sup>43</sup> (Perhaps showing the effects of old age, Adams apparently had forgotten that the French Revolution, which he despised, had done much to abolish this barbaric legislation in Europe.)

He confided to Jefferson in a letter dated January 23, 1825:

In America it is not much better; even in our own Massachusetts, which I believe, upon the whole, is as temperate and moderate in religious zeal as most of the states, a law was made in the latter end of the last century, repealing the cruel punishments of the former laws but substituting fine and imprisonment upon all those blasphemers.<sup>44</sup>

Although Adams believed the Bible was of divine origin, he thought that if it could not bear critical scrutiny, its message would be impugned. As he put it, “Books that cannot bear examination, certainly ought not to be established as divine inspiration by penal laws.”<sup>45</sup> Sounding more and more like Jefferson during his last years in attacking laws against blasphemy, Adams reiterated:

As long as they continue in force as laws, the human mind must make an awkward and clumsy progress in its investigations. I wish they were repealed. The substance and essence of Christianity, as I understand it, is eternal and unchangeable, and will bear examination forever, but it has been mixed with extraneous ingredients, which I think will not bear examination, and they ought to be repealed.<sup>46</sup>

In his letters to Jefferson, Adams tended to voice his most liberal religious thoughts. As early as 1813, he had assured him that he desired religious freedom even for those who rejected the divinity of Christ. He applauded the movement in England to protect deists, observing, “The Bill in Parliament for the relief of Anti-Trinitarians is a great Event; and will form an Epoch in Ecclesiastical History. The Motion was made by my Friend [William] Smith of Clapham, a Friend of the Belshams. I Should be very happy to hear that the Bill is passed.”<sup>47</sup>

However, in common with many American Protestant leaders, Adams strongly objected to Roman Catholicism. He expressed his prejudices to Jefferson, who to some extent shared his doubts that the rebellious South American colonies could maintain a republican form of government, because their citizens were unduly devoted to benighted Roman Catholicism and its pro-monarchical priesthood. Adams wrote in 1821 that he had long thought “that a free government and the Roman Catholic religion can never exist together in any nation or country.”<sup>48</sup> Hence, despite some indications of increased religious toleration in his later correspondence with Jefferson, Adams’ preference for Protestant Christianity remains quite clear. The letters offer no evidence of an intent on his part to disestablish the Congregational church.

## ADAMS’ 1820 LETTER TO HENRY CHANNING

Let us turn back to events contemporaneous with the state constitutional convention and to other primary sources that might provide a clue as to Adams’ role in it. In 1820 Henry Channing, brother of the Massachusetts Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing, sent Adams the revised 1818 Connecticut constitution which had abolished that state’s established church. He hoped that it would encourage Adams to support the separation of church and state at the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention. (Massachusetts was the only state in the Union that still had an established church at this time.) In contrast to the second-hand account in Josiah Quincy’s diary, Adams’ response left no doubt that he endorsed the state’s religious establishment.

Adams responded to Channing shortly before the Massachusetts convention in 1820. In this letter, Adams made clear that he would continue to support the Congregationalist religious establishment despite growing popular opposition. He believed that an elaborate religious establishment, replete with pomp and ceremony, was the only way people would attend to religion, because they enjoyed viewing ornate rituals that, in their eyes, made good use of their monetary contributions. He explained, “An abolition of this



law [for religious establishment] would have so great an effect in this State that it seems hazardous to touch it.” He had learned that in Rhode Island, where religious freedom had long prevailed, most people failed to contribute to the churches and were apathetic about religion. “In Rhode Island, I am informed, public preaching is supported by three or four wealthy men in the parish, who either have, or appear to have, a regard for religion, while all others sneak away, and avoid payment of any thing,” he wrote. “And such, I believe, would be the effect in this State almost universally; yet this I own is not a decisive argument in favor of the law.”<sup>49</sup>

The likelihood that such apathy would dry up church funding justified continued support for a religious establishment, Adams contended, even though he recognized his argument was weak and that it ignored people’s natural right to religious freedom. However, he was convinced that most people simultaneously enjoyed and revered elaborate ceremony and splendor. “The feelings of the people will have pomp and parade of some sort or another, in the State, as well as in the Church,” he declared. He thought that this had been true throughout history.<sup>50</sup>

Professing humility in his declining years, Adams said that his election to the 1820 convention despite his “great age and feeble condition,” and his being “but the shadow of a man,” was “the purest honor of my life.” At the age of eighty-five, Adams realistically regarded his election to the convention and appointment as its president (which he wisely declined) as more a sign of respect for his age and services than of the voters’ expectation that he would dominate the proceedings.<sup>51</sup> Viewing himself as the father of the 1780 Constitution, his energies, he wrote Channing, would be devoted to preserving that venerable instrument of government from major change.<sup>52</sup>

In his last years, Adams, with renewed attachment to Puritan Congregationalism and increased doubt about the virtues of Unitarianism (as he revealed in a letter to Jefferson in 1813, in which he attacked the Unitarian journal, the *Repository*), lashed out against the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church with the fury of a Voltaire.<sup>53</sup> However, he exempted Congregationalism from his wrath. As we have seen, on the eve of attending the Massachusetts constitutional convention in 1820, he reasserted his loyalty to Article III of its Declaration of Rights, which set up the Congregational Church as the state’s established church. “An abolition of this law would have so great an effect in this State that it seems hazardous to touch it,” he concluded his letter to Channing.<sup>54</sup>

## THE 1820 CONVENTION

Surprising as it may seem considering historians' assertions, the extant evidence suggests that Adams did little at the 1820 Massachusetts constitutional convention—which was in session from November 15, 1820 to January 9, 1821—to promote religious freedom. Nonetheless, it is disconcerting that the biographies of Adams do not pay more attention to this, his final public service. In light of his advanced age, it is likely that the citizens of his hometown, Quincy, who elected him their delegate by a unanimous vote, expected him to do little at the convention and merely intended to do homage to their greatest citizen. This was also likely the case when he was honored by being offered the presidency by an overwhelming majority of the convention delegates.

Chinard's discussion of Adams at the convention in *Honest John Adams* merely consists of two inaccurate sentences; yet other scholars have relied on Chinard's account.<sup>55</sup> As we saw earlier, according to Chinard, "Adams . . . proposed that the third article of the Declaration of Rights be amended so as to do away with the recognition of distinct modes of religious faith by the State. It was to some extent a parallel of the bill for religious freedom proposed by Jefferson some fifty years before." Chinard's only source for these assumptions is Charles Francis Adams' biography of his grandfather in the first volume of his edition of Adams' *Works*, which failed to provide documentation for the statement.<sup>56</sup>

In any case, Adams' vague proposal that all people receive the "equal protection of the laws" whatever their religion is a far cry from disestablishing the Congregational Church or promoting religious freedom. Nevertheless, it is likely that exposure to Jefferson and Monroe's ideas and their good will during his retirement had mellowed his religious views by the time he attended the Convention. But even in this instance, he ended up taking a leave of absence and had others make the proposal for him. The convention journal for December 18, 1820 cryptically records, "Leave of absence was granted to Mr. Adams of Quincy on account of indisposition, and to Mr. BAYLIES of Wellington on account of ill health."<sup>57</sup>

The extent of Adams' illness is not clear; it is possible that the aging founder wanted only to relieve himself from the convention's rough-and-tumble politics. By May 1821, he was expressing gratitude for his general good health. As he wrote John Jay, "My health, strength, and Spirits, tho attended with many infirmities, have not been very Common in persons of my age. I am thankful for them. They have supported me under the Vicissitudes, disappointments, Calamities and Afflictions of Life."<sup>58</sup>

The aging Adams did not expect to play a significant role at the Convention. When the famous astronomer and mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch sent him birthday greetings, he informed him of the recent balloting. “My Election to a Seat in the Convention as it was the Spontaneous effect of the good Will of my Neighbours in my Native Town, has given me much pleasure,” he wrote, “and as I have not perceived that it has been disapproved by the Community at large—It affords me much satisfaction—but I fear it will prove but a Compliment, for I cannot flatter myself that I can do much good.”<sup>59</sup>

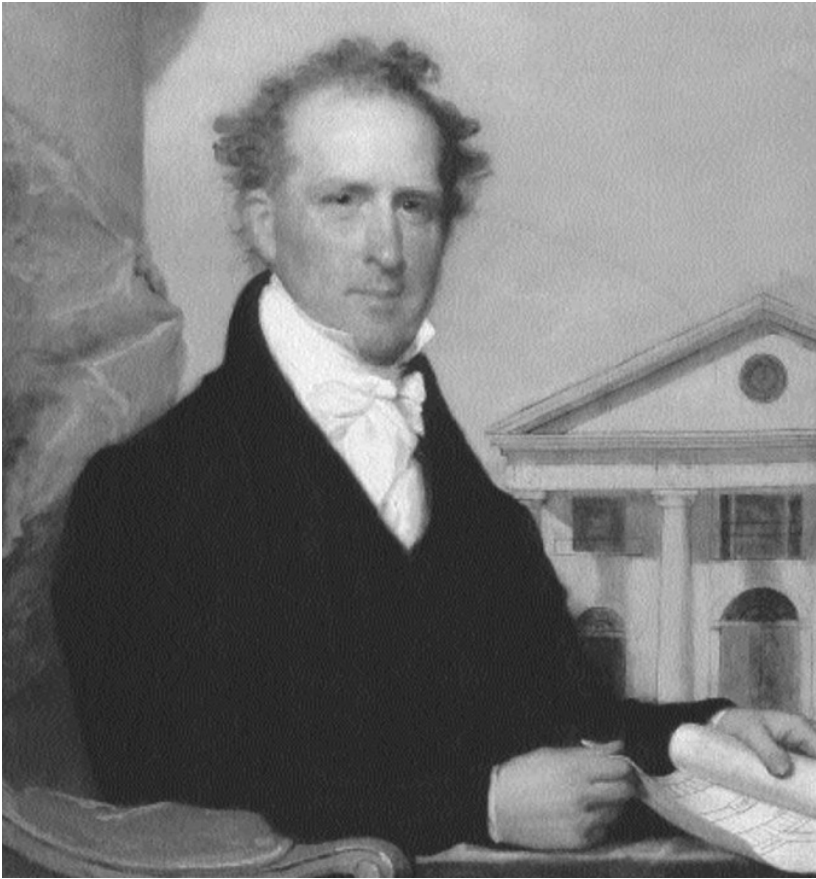
Anticipating that his health would not hold out for the Convention’s duration, he lamented:

The faint glimmerings of the expireing Lamp gives little light.  
I cannot expect to be able to give a Constant attendance, I can  
no longer speak in public; and to Compare a little thing with a  
great, like Solon after his return from his travels; I shall find that  
I cannot harangue the People. I have lost my influence.

Having turned eighty-five a few days earlier, he observed, “Your recollection of my Birth day reminds me of my Age; And that I am soon to pass away. And if I shall fall in this last service I shall die in the Bed of honor.” He hoped the Convention would not attempt any radical reforms to a document he had largely written: “Such is the mass of Wealth, Talents, Authority Virtues and Piety returned, as members of this Assembly I feel a Confidence that no material Alterations will be made in the old Fabrick.”<sup>60</sup> Adams was aware that death was, inevitably, near. Still, as was always true of Adams, he intended to leave his mark on the convention’s proceedings. At least to an extent, he succeeded.

Although age may have partly accounted for his relative inertia at the convention, Adams had sufficient energy to attend for a month, and lived six more years afterwards. To his credit, he wanted all men who behaved peaceably in society as “good subjects,” as he allegedly put it (according to those who presented his proposed amendment to the Convention after he left) “to enjoy the equal protection of the laws.” He no longer wanted a revised constitution to restrict such protection (as Article III of the Constitution of 1780’s Declaration of Rights had) only to “men of every denomination of Christians.”<sup>61</sup>

The journal of young Josiah Quincy, who watched the convention from the gallery, indicates that Adams made no speech for religious liberty. Quincy recalled that Adams had difficulty speaking and spoke “little.” He recorded



### **Josiah Quincy III**

Portrait by Gilbert Stuart, 1824-25

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only that the elderly sage rose to support retaining a property qualification for the vote. Adams denounced the increasingly popular concept of universal manhood suffrage, depicting it as a legacy of France's Reign of Terror. Pointing out that in most parts of the U.S. a relatively equal distribution of property existed, Adams argued that more people would be ambitious and seek to own property if their right to vote depended on it. Thus, he concluded, property requirements for voting contributed to disperse property ownership further, and all states should adopt them.

Furthermore, Adams took for granted that an expanded suffrage would inadvertently increase the political power of unscrupulous, wealthy

conspirators, who would employ their money in buying the votes of the newly enfranchised poor, corrupting the election process. In Adams' interpretation of history, the founders of Massachusetts showed their wisdom by instituting a property qualification. When the suffrage embraced the poorest members of society, Adams warned, "The rich man, by the influence resulting from his property over those who had nothing to lose and everything to gain from his favor, would make himself master of the situation." Adams had always believed that a small property qualification protected the poor against the rich.<sup>62</sup>

Although the convention voted against his positions, Adams said he considered the delegates his children, and himself the venerable Father of Massachusetts, as George Washington was the Father of his Country.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to his copious notes on Adams' opposition to an expanded suffrage, Quincy mentioned nothing about Adams' promoting religious freedom or stating any opinion about religion at the convention.

Absenting himself from the discussions after December 18, 1820 because of a "fever,"<sup>64</sup> Adams left it to Chief Justice Isaac Parker, president of the convention, to put forward his proposal that the constitution endorse greater religious toleration. Parker apparently fulfilled this task without enthusiasm. The convention journal stated only that:

Mr. PARKER of Boston rose at the request of the gentleman from Quincy [Adams], who is unavoidably absent, to propose that in the Article III of the Declaration of Rights, the words "all men of all religions, demeaning themselves as good subjects, shall enjoy the equal protection of the laws," should be inserted, instead of the words 'men of every denomination of Christians.'<sup>65</sup>

At that point, the following scenario occurred: "Mr. Williams [Ephraim Williams, a delegate from the town of Deerfield in Franklin County] had no special objection to the proposition, but did not think it would meet the wishes of the people of this Commonwealth. Mr. PARKER withdrew the proposition." Adams himself never personally offered the proposal "that all men of all religions, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the Commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law[s]."<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, Williams' counterproposal, asserting religious freedom for all "christians," merely abolished compulsory attendance at "public worship." Williams insisted that all Christian religious societies, whether incorporated or unincorporated, should decide by majority vote how to raise money to pay their teachers and expenses. More draconically,

Williams proposed forcing all persons to join a Christian church; those who failed to do so “shall be classed with the Parish or Precinct in which they may reside, and shall be liable to be taxed by the same.”<sup>67</sup> Although Williams’ proposal was defeated, even Adams’ proviso said nothing about disestablishing the Congregational Church or permitting complete religious freedom.

Adams’ amendment was proposed a second time in his absence by his second cousin, delegate Ward Nicholas Boylston (1747-1828) of the town of Princeton. The *Journal of Debates and Proceedings of the Convention* for December 28 noted:

Mr. BOYLSTON of Princeton, at the suggestion of Mr. ADAMS of Quincy, who was absent, offered a resolution proposing to alter the constitution, so that instead of ‘every denomination of Christians’ &c it should read, “all men, of all religions, demeaning themselves peaceably and as good subjects of the Commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law.”<sup>68</sup>

This time, instead of being withdrawn, the resolution was referred to the Committee of the Whole on the Declaration of Rights. In merely broadening the “protection of the laws” to include non-Christians as well as Christians, the amendment was hardly an epochal measure.<sup>69</sup> It did not constitute a guarantee of religious freedom, since among the “laws” remained Article III of the Declaration of Rights, which made the Congregational Church the preferred church.

In making the proposal his own, Boylston, a millionaire who inherited a great deal of property from an uncle, assured the convention that its impact on religious establishment would be minimal. Asserting that he was motivated by a desire to encourage the state’s economic growth, he “said that his object was entirely in a commercial relation. It was intended to invite foreigners to come to our shores, by the offer of equal protection to all men of all religious opinions. As the constitution now stands, the offer of protection was confined to persons of the Christian religion.”<sup>70</sup> Boylston indicated that he opposed authentic freedom of religion when he voted against an amendment by delegate Henry H. Childs of Pittsfield, which stated, “no person shall by law be compelled to join or support . . . any congregation or religious society whatever,” the closest approximation to disestablishment offered at the convention. Although Jeffersonian advocates of religious freedom such as Levi Lincoln and Henry A. S. Dearborn voted for the measure, it was overwhelmingly defeated, 136 to 246.<sup>71</sup>

Even Boylston's moderate amendment, reiterating Adams' wishes, failed by an unrecorded vote. Boston delegates John Davis, Samuel Hubbard, and Josiah Quincy, opponents of the amendment, convincingly pointed out that it did no more than reiterate provisions of the existing constitution. They argued that, if further protection of non-Protestants before the law were needed, it would best be secured by ordinary legislation. Hubbard argued that by permitting non-Christians to worship God, the state granted everyone equal protection of the laws, despite their subjection to funding the Protestant religious establishment. He "read the second article of the [1780] bill of rights which he thought made the most ample provision for the object."<sup>72</sup>

Likewise, Davis argued that constitutional provisions extending the equal protection of the laws to non-Christians were inappropriate. Such regulations should be within the purview of ordinary legislation. Davis considered it a matter of course that all persons enjoyed the equal protection of the laws, no matter what the constitution might say. "He thought it would be better to leave it to legislative discretion. Persons of all religions have in fact full and equal protection" of the laws; the laws made this clear. Quincy claimed that the Adams/Boylston amendment unjustly stigmatized the existing constitution, which he insisted already offered all denominations equal protection before the law. Curiously, none of the delegates seemed to regard Adams' proposal as a threat to the state-supported, established Protestant church.

Not even the reputedly radical Unitarians, who probably expected eventually to become the most popular denomination and reap the rewards of a state-funded church, broached the Establishment issue.<sup>73</sup> During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Unitarians had fought orthodox Congregationalists and evangelicals for control of the Massachusetts churches and parishes. They seemed to be gaining the upper hand, as the famous *Baker vs. Fales* court decision (1821) for control of the Dedham Church indicated. Ironically, during the 1820s the Unitarians, rather than the orthodox, were most in favor of an established church, expecting to benefit most from such an institution in the near future.<sup>74</sup>

The convention debate over retaining the requirement that all persons holding elective office must swear that they were Christians revealed religious orthodoxy's continuing strength in the state. Salem delegate Leverett Saltonstall, who was destined for a distinguished career as Salem's first mayor and as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, wanted to retain the religious oath, which a committee had proposed to abolish. He explained that he intended not to bar competent, intelligent men from office but to maintain a "common religion," a venerable tradition that preserved



law, order, and morality. Society has a “right to decide what offices they will have, and what shall be the qualifications for them,” he said. Therefore, the requirement that all government officials be Christians was desirable. Christianity’s benign teachings had a “good tendency on rulers and people.” Even though non-Christians were excluded from office, they did not lose the freedom to worship God in their own way. “To punish men for believing or not believing is cruelty; but to annex conditions to offices is perfectly justifiable, and indeed necessary,” he explained. The people had the right to require their rulers to possess certain qualifications, including that of being Christians. As part of the existing 1780 Constitution, the religious oath made Massachusetts “a religious Commonwealth,” said Saltonstall; it was responsible for the state’s “present elevated character.”<sup>75</sup>

Saltonstall argued that, even were the Briton Edward Gibbon, the brilliant author of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to stand for office in Massachusetts, he would exclude him from office as an atheist. Especially if involved in political life, Saltonstall concluded, non-Christians endangered society: “As to Jews, Mahometans, Deists and Atheists, they are all opposed to the common religion of the Commonwealth and believe it an imposition, a mere fable, and that its professors are all under a wretched delusion. Are such persons suitable rulers of a Christian State?” The requirement that all government officials adopt Christianity was responsible for Massachusetts’ greatness and success, Saltonstall contended. Otherwise, it would become a playground for “infidels.”<sup>76</sup>

Despite Saltonstall’s perseverance, the convention, responding to public opinion, abolished the Christian requirement for office-holders.<sup>77</sup> Adams did not contribute to this debate over enforced religious conformity. Perhaps he expected the Christian oath to be repealed, or he had not decided how he stood on the issue. He had been a vigorous advocate of a religious test as a requirement for state government service at the 1779-1780 Constitutional Convention, where it was adopted. Adams admitted to being the author and draftsman of the constitution that was presented to the convention in October 1779, except for Article III, which he claimed was not his creation.<sup>78</sup> Adams’ committee included Samuel Adams and James Bowdoin. Like him, they were devout Congregationalists who would have no objection to a religious test, although some members of the 1779-1780 Convention unsuccessfully proposed making the requirement even more rigorous by restricting office holding to “Protestants” alone.<sup>79</sup>

As the 1780 Constitution’s main draftsman, it is likely that Adams inspired the provision that members of the legislature must be Christians. The draft he submitted revealed a deep concern over forcing all office holders

to adopt Christianity. He inserted the requirement at five different places in the Constitution (if we count the statement that the lieutenant governor must “be qualified, in point of religion”). The oath he required of those who served as elective officials, such as the governor, lieutenant governor, councilors, representatives and senators, stated, “I, A.B., do now declare, that I believe and profess the Christian religion, from a firm persuasion of its truth.” He repeated this requirement in slightly different words, as in stipulating, “no person shall be qualified, or eligible” to serve in the state house of representatives “unless he be of the christian religion” and that “no person shall be capable of being elected as a Senator who is not of the christian religion.”<sup>80</sup> Apparently exasperated by the redundant appearance of the religious test in Adams’ draft, the 1780 Convention only mentioned this requirement for elected officials twice.<sup>81</sup> Having abandoned the Protestant religious zealotry of his Revolutionary years and become more enlightened about religious matters in old age, at the 1820 convention, Adams, in an instance of self-restraint rare for him, failed to defend his proposal of more than forty years earlier.<sup>82</sup>

Unfortunately, Adams’ well-intentioned contribution to aspects of the debate over freedom of religion was relatively insubstantial. Indeed, since Adams was absent from the Convention after December 18, 1820, his impact on its decisions could not have been great. More importantly, Adams’ recommendation at the 1820 convention, even if it were enacted, would not have actually added substantially to the liberties, religious or otherwise, that people in Massachusetts ostensibly enjoyed. Article X of the Declaration of Rights, already part of the Constitution in 1780, asserted, “Each individual of the society has a right to be protected by it in the enjoyment of his life, liberty, and property, according to standing laws.” This was hardly different from Adams’ request, made through intermediaries like Chief Justice Parker and Mr. Boylston.<sup>83</sup>

By February 1821, Adams had apparently recovered from his illness. In his correspondence, he self-effacingly omitted his efforts *in absentia* on behalf of religious freedom. He informed his old friend Francis Van der Kemp that he had risked his health by undertaking his “Romantic expedition to Boston.” During his “daring attendance at the convention,” he explained, he contracted a fever which left him bedridden for almost two months. He said he had been ill from December 18 until February 11, when he “ventured out to Church, for the first time.” Indeed, Adams the “church-going animal” particularly regretted his inability to resume his church attendance until the middle of February 1821. According to one biographer, Adams attended Congregational Church services twice a day on Sunday.<sup>84</sup>

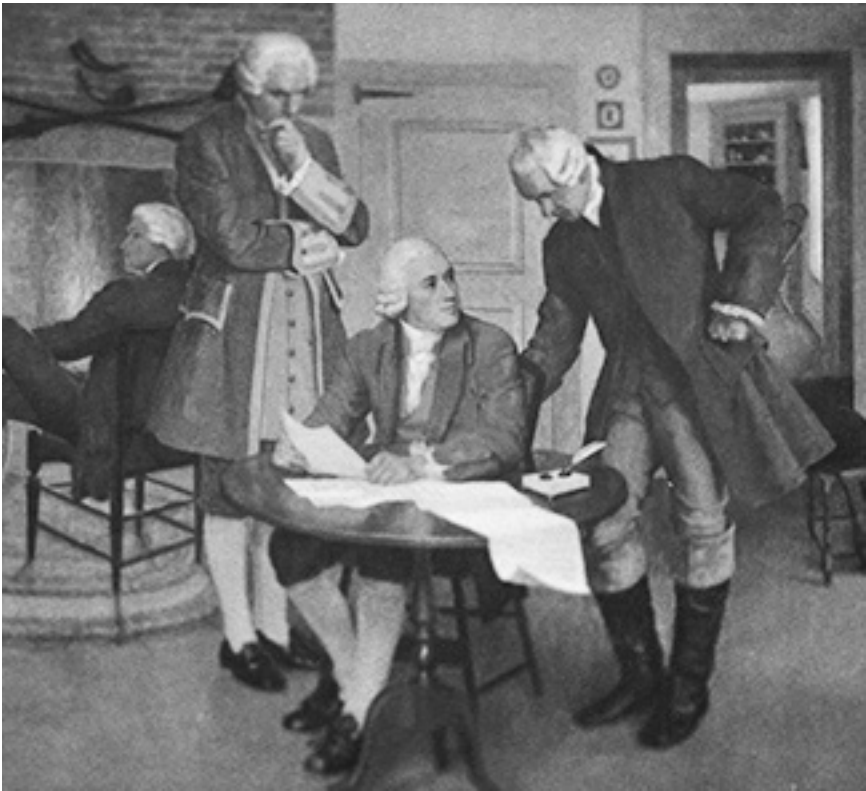
Adams had been studying religion since his youth. His father had wanted him to enter the ministry. While recuperating from his "fever," Adams read a biography of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who, he disparagingly observed, was "one of the most remarkable Characters that Enthusiasm, Superstition, fanaticism, ever produced," exceeding even Ignatius Loyola (founder of the Roman Catholic Jesuit order) in his foolishness. "Will Mankind be forever credulous dupes of such vagaries?" he lamented. "When will Men be rational Creatures?"<sup>85</sup> Summarizing his readings of European evangelicals in a letter to Jefferson, he likewise wrote, "[Emanuel] Swedenborg and Westley had certainly vast memories and immaginations, and great talents for Lunaticks."<sup>86</sup> Apparently, his brief attendance at the convention had not imbued Adams with sympathy for the emerging Baptist and Methodist evangelical denominations that were becoming increasingly numerous in his state.

### **JOHN ADAMS AND ARTICLE III: FADING MEMORY OR DELIBERATE MANIPULATION?**

One final, potentially contradictory source needs to be examined. In old age, Adams' political and religious views in several respects became more liberal than they had been in the past. However, despite his greater tolerance of deism and atheism, his recommendation of equality before the law for all religions, and his denunciation of statutes incriminating blasphemy as violations of freedom of speech, Adams never specifically disavowed his support for the idea of a Protestant established church in Massachusetts. Curiously, however, in a letter dated February 25, 1812 to Maine attorney and politician William D. Williamson, Adams denied that he helped compose Article III of the constitution's Declaration of Rights, claiming that this was the only section of the constitution for which he was not responsible. He wrote:

The Article relative to religion was not drawn by me or by the sub-committee [composed of John and Samuel Adams and James Bowdoin, all advocates of the established church]. I could not satisfy my own judgment with any article I thought would be acceptable, and further, [I thought] that some of the clergy or older and graver persons than myself would be more likely to hit the taste of the public.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps his memory played tricks on him when he wrote this letter, for unknown reasons apart from his age (his late seventies). The same letter to Williamson also contained Adams' mistaken recollections of several other aspects of his drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. When the thirty-man constitutional drafting committee met in Boston on September 13, 1779, it named a subcommittee composed of convention President James Bowdoin, Samuel Adams, and John Adams to draft a tentative constitution. The subcommittee assigned the writing of the document to John Adams. According to his letter to Williamson, when Samuel Adams and James Bowdoin examined his work, they objected to only "one line of no consequence," which he agreed to delete. Adams also told Williamson that the drafting committee made significant changes, substituting a qualified gubernatorial veto subject to override by a two-thirds vote of both houses



**John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin Drafting the  
Massachusetts Constitution of 1780**

Painting by Albert Herter, 1942

for Adams' absolute, unchallengeable executive veto. According to Adams, they also struck out Adams' provision that the governor alone should appoint militia officers; they preferred that the subaltern officers and men of the regiments choose them. The editors of *The Papers of John Adams* write, "Adams' memory was faulty for both these changes were made by the full convention. The committee's printed Report of a Constitution . . . includes neither of these alterations."<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, Adams' own contemporary comments contradicted this 1812 letter. His comments on the changes the full committee of revision made to his draft are contained in his letters to Elbridge Gerry and Benjamin Rush in November 1779. They indicate that his later statements to Williamson were erroneous. Unlike Adams, Gerry favored limiting the executive's veto to laws that directly involved executive powers. He warned that there was "too much Reason to apprehend . . . great Injuries and that the Community will be endangered" by Adams' proposed absolute gubernatorial veto. In response, Adams boasted that the full committee upheld his views: "I am clear for Three Branches, in the Legislature, and the Committee have reported as much, tho awkwardly expressed." (This was his way of expounding his theory that the governor, in addition to being the state executive, possessed the "legislative" power of vetoing proposed laws, making him in effect a third branch of the legislature.) Adams made a similar report to Rush, while admitting that he wished the drafting committee had satisfied his desire to officially designate the governor a third, separate branch of the legislature.<sup>89</sup> The convention in committee of the whole eliminated the absolute gubernatorial veto, a fact that may have been painful to Adams as constituting a rejection by the entire body, and which he therefore may have desired to forget.

Since Adams' erroneous statements, most importantly his denial that he composed Article III of the Declaration of Rights, were all contained in this single letter to Williamson, it is possible that his memory was for some reason impaired when he wrote the letter. In light of this strange lapse of memory in 1812, one cannot unquestioningly accept his statement to Williamson that he did not help draft Article III of the Declaration of Rights. In any case, he never vigorously opposed the established church, revealing that his support for freedom of religion was less than absolute.<sup>90</sup>

## THE DILEMMA OF JOSIAH QUINCY'S 1820 DIARY ENTRY

The historical record explored so far suggests that John Adams did little to promote greater religious freedom in Massachusetts at the convention of 1820-21. Nonetheless, there is one other contradictory source we need to

examine. In words ascribed to him by Edmund Quincy, ostensibly recorded in his father Josiah Quincy's diary for May 31, 1820, Adams reiterated, several months before his election to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, that he did not compose Article III of the Declaration of Rights. Reminiscing about his role in writing the Massachusetts constitution of 1780, Adams allegedly told Quincy in 1820 that one of the few sections he did not compose was Article III of the Declaration of Rights, which made the Congregational Church the established church. Again, Adams seems to want to deny responsibility for the constitution's religious clauses. According to Quincy's diary entry, Adams purportedly asserted:

I found I could not sketch [it], consistent with my own sentiments of perfect religious freedom, with any hope of its being adopted by the Convention, so I left it to be battled out in the whole body.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, as in his letter eight years earlier to Williamson, we find Adams wanting to convince his interlocutor that he did not compose the section of the 1779-1780 Constitution that set up a religious establishment. In this case, he implied that he abandoned the Convention in midstream out of dismay at the possibility that he might have to compromise his "sentiments of perfect religious freedom."

Perhaps it should be mentioned that, when Adams left the Convention, his departure was not voluntary. On September 25, 1779, Congress nominated him as a peace commissioner to Great Britain. He left Boston on the French frigate *Sensible* on November 13, 1779, so he was unable to attend the latter half of the convention. He had already indirectly revealed his acceptance of an "establishment" of Christianity by requiring all elected government officials to be Christians. Five years earlier, he supported Congregationalism's special privileges in his debate with representatives of the Quakers and Baptists at the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia in 1774.<sup>92</sup>

Several explanations for Adams' testimony to Quincy are possible. Adams may have never made this remark or it may have been misinterpreted. Or, if he uttered these words (made in a private conversation), he may have been unconsciously transposing into the distant past his newly acquired respect for "perfect religious freedom," derived partly from his resurrected friendship with Jefferson and the influence of that lifelong advocate of religious liberty.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, after his wife Abigail died in 1818, his most enduring friendship, albeit conducted solely by letter, was with the Sage of Monticello, and it became increasingly precious to him. He tended more and more to

identify with Jefferson, espousing an Anglophobic, Democratic-Republican viewpoint during the War of 1812. Indeed, from 1819 until a few years before his death he humorously addressed his letters as coming from “Montecilo” or “Montezillo,” thus pretending that he was Jefferson’s alter ego by inventing a home with a similar name.<sup>94</sup>

To sum up, Adams’ recommendation that all individual “subjects” receive the protection of the laws was not a great step forward from the Constitution of 1780, Article II of whose Declaration of Rights vaguely protected non-Christians’ freedom of worship. He may not have entirely convinced himself that complete religious equality, especially for non-Christians, was desirable for Massachusetts.

### **ADAMS’ SUPPORT FOR REFORMING THE GOVERNOR’S COUNCIL AT THE 1820 CONVENTION**

On the other hand, during his brief attendance at the 1820 Convention, Adams took one unequivocal and unusually liberal stance. He sought to secure a democratic reform of the Governor’s Council, in accordance with his doctrine of separation of powers. Unfortunately, this rare example of Adams’ populist assertiveness, which comports with his more liberal political attitudes (including support of Democratic-Republicanism) in the last twenty years of his life, has gone unnoticed by historians. He supported a proposal by Perez Morton of Dorchester for the nine-member council’s direct election by popular vote in districts, rather than the prevailing mode, its selection by the legislature from a list of forty candidates nominated by the voters in their senatorial districts.<sup>95</sup>

George Blake was a Boston delegate who, despite advocating freedom of the press in pamphlets denouncing the Sedition Act of 1798, had abandoned the Democratic-Republicans during the Embargo crisis of 1808-1809. He proposed retaining the 1780 Constitution’s provisions respecting the Governor’s Council. The Convention’s journal recorded, “Mr. Blake then moved to amend the resolution of the select committee so as to declare that it is not expedient to make any alteration in the constitution in regard to the election of counsellors.”<sup>96</sup>

Showing some of the spirit of his younger days, Adams challenged Blake. He confessed he would like to “annihilate the Council” altogether, because it encroached on the governor’s prerogative by sharing various appointive and executive powers with him. To make matters worse, Adams argued that, under the 1780 Constitution, the council, unlike the governor and the lieutenant governor, was not elected by the people. If one counted the



lieutenant governor and the nine-member council, the executive “consisted of eleven hands,” although in Adams’ view it should only consist of a single person: the governor. “But nine are not appointed by the people,” he protested. “Returning forty men out of whom they [the council] are to be chosen is not expressing the voice of the people. Intermixing them with forty men chosen for Senators is no election by the people at all.” He continued, “The two Houses of the legislature make an election of nine out of forty to form part of the executive. It is such an intermingling of powers as no free government can long live under.”<sup>97</sup> Such conditions violated the separation of powers, which Adams idolized.

If a council were necessary, Adams preferred that the people rather than the legislature choose it. He believed that popular election better accorded with the separation of powers, which he considered “essential.” According to Adams, the nine counsellors that the legislature appointed might be the governor’s enemies, precipitating gridlock in the government. In the future, as the state’s population and resources expanded, he warned, politicians would become more “ambitious” and immoral, and the danger of corruption and conspiracy would increase. Consequently, he favored “districting the Commonwealth and giving the choice [of the councilors] to the people. It is only by giving to the governor a decisive authority that he can administer with success.”<sup>98</sup>

Adams believed that the state’s previous governors had been trustworthy men, proving the wisdom of popular election. Perhaps reflecting on how his cabinet had betrayed him during his presidency, with Secretary of State Timothy Pickering secretly advising the Senate to reject his son-in-law William S. Smith for appointment as adjutant-general of the Army in 1798, Adams abruptly launched into an attack on the U.S. Constitution for granting the Senate too much power. Vaguely alluding to his presidency, he said, “The power given to the [U.S.] Senate would be the total ruin of the Constitution of the United States, or it must be amended.”<sup>99</sup> In deference to Adams, Blake temporarily withdrew his amendment. “The question turned upon the proposition of Mr. Morton,” which was, however, defeated 149 to 121.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps because of the venerated Adams’ dramatic speech, Blake became somewhat defensive. Although he agreed that the people had the natural right to elect the council, he confessed that he preferred to “revert to the mode prescribed in the constitution” to attain harmony in the convention.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, he withdrew his amendment for retaining the existing provisions for electing counsellors. Instead, he introduced the amendment Adams supported, for the election of the Governors’ Council on “a general ticket”

by a district's voters. Revealing the humility that perhaps came with old age, Adams in response minimized his importance and gently scolded Blake for deferring to him. He described himself as merely "the representative of a small town, and that no more weight ought to be given to his opinion, than to that of any other delegate." In advocating a direct choice by the people, Adams reminisced about his service at the founding convention of 1780. He said that he "did not believe there was a member of that [1780] convention, who would have wished the people to be deprived of the right of electing the Counsellors" and indicated his intention to vote for the amendment.<sup>102</sup> This recollection perhaps made the members of the original Convention, including Adams, appear more democratic-minded than they actually were.

On December 7, 1820, the amendment narrowly succeeded in the committee of the whole, 193 to 179. Apparently, Adams' backing was crucial. After his departure, it lost support. Although Blake had sponsored it, he apparently did so as a trial balloon, expecting it to suffer defeat. The day after Adams left the Convention, Blake reasserted his opposition, declaring, "The proposition to choose by a general ticket, to be sure, had passed the committee of the whole, but by so small a majority that he was willing to consider it as rejected." After vigorous debate, it failed final approval by the Convention (136 to 122), and did not appear as one of the amendments it recommended to the people. The legislature continued to choose the councilors from a list sent in by the senatorial districts.<sup>103</sup> Had Adams, who supported the popular election of councilors, remained in attendance at the convention, the result might have been different.

## ADAMS ON THE CONVENTION'S AFTERMATH

Immediately after the Convention ended, Adams summarized his opinion of its achievements in letters to his friends. He praised the distinction, erudition, and impressive political experience of most of the delegates, rather than their specific decisions. "The Convention, I agree with you," he wrote David Sewall, the federal district judge in Maine, who had graduated from Harvard College with him many years earlier, "is as wise learned and Patriotic an assembly as ever convened in New England—and I will add or in Old England—and I may add in the Old World." Ignoring the convention's rejection of his proposal for popular election of councilors, Adams claimed that its choice of him as president was "proof that my principles and systems of Government are openly adopted and avowed by that great assembly which is a city sett on a Hill." He reiterated his lifelong opinion that both rich and poor too selfishly sought to advance their private interests, rather than

compromising for the common good. He believed constitutional reform required

a dispassionate investigation of the Nature of Man and of Society—and . . . temperate precautions against excess of passions in the Rich and the poor, Wise and the foolish, the learned, & the ignorant—For it is most manifest that Information has been wanting in all these Classes of Persons for the last thirty years.<sup>104</sup>

In his correspondence after the Convention ended, Adams emphasized his opposition to abolishing the property requirements for Massachusetts suffrage. He also objected to an expanded suffrage in New York State. Adams insisted that government's primary purpose was the security of property, which would be threatened by giving the vote to those without property. Upholding the balance between legislature and executive and the defeat of universal manhood suffrage were his main objectives at the Convention. Perhaps aware that his modest suggestion for the "equal protection of the laws" did not really amount to religious liberty, when he discussed the convention with his friends he mentioned nothing about religion or his alleged proposal for religious freedom.<sup>105</sup>

Writing to Jefferson in May 1821, he remained reticent about his role and said nothing about his effort to extend religious freedom. He repeated his ambivalence about the wisdom of popular rule but expressed a more favorable attitude toward democracy than he had in the past. "The Art of Lawgiving is not so easy as that of Architecture or Painting," he observed. He confided:

Massachusetts has had her Convention: but our Sovereign Lords  
The People think themselves wiser than their Representatives,  
and in several Articles I agree with their Lordships. Yet there  
never was a cooler, a more patient candid, or a wiser deliberative  
Body than that Convention.

Adams may have been thinking of the people's opposition to the religious establishment reflected in the referendum vote against retaining Article III and of his own support for direct election of the governor's council. He concluded:

I may be an Enthusiast. But I think a free Government is  
necessarily a complicated Piece of Machinery, the nice and exact  
Adjustment of whose Springs Wheels and Weights are not well

comprehended by the Artists of the Age [the politicians and political theorists] and still less by the People.<sup>106</sup>

After returning from the Convention, Adams showed greater interest in New York politics and the world situation generally than in the Massachusetts constitution. For example, he wrote to John Jay, who in his final years became almost as dear a correspondent to him as Jefferson was, about his ideas on government. He was hopeful that Europe and South America would experience increased, albeit moderate, political liberty. He made clear his opposition to the absolute monarchies, whose domination of the European continent was threatened by the French Revolution's legacy. He wrote:

There is an effervescence among Mankind at present, which is portentous of changes in Religion and Government, I hope for the better in both. For the latter, they can scarcely be for the worse.

Adams expected a continuance of the current wars and rebellions abroad: "The process will be long and bloody," he predicted:

Self-love prompts men to believe themselves wiser and better than they are. We are not sufficiently sensible of the weakness of our nature, which cannot bear Prosperity and Power any more than the body can bear the mess of ardent spirits without intoxication.

He emphasized the necessity throughout Europe and America for "Peace, Order and Liberty; three blessings so essentially connected together that neither can exist without the other two."<sup>107</sup> Thus, Adams revealed his persisting political moderation.

In this area, Jay had always been a kindred spirit. For this reason, Adams wrote him of his endorsement of the recently revised Massachusetts constitution, which, except for the regrettable expansion of the suffrage to end the property qualification and bestow the vote on all male taxpayers, remained the instrument that he had in large part framed in 1779. Alluding to the upcoming New York Constitutional Convention, which would meet from August to November of 1821, Adams hoped the aging Jay would attend. "It will want some such heart of Oak as to support the Temple. Massachusetts has supported and confirmed the Essence of her Fabric with amazing unanimity."<sup>108</sup> Thus, he gave his stamp of approval to the

Massachusetts convention despite its rejection of concrete steps to promote religious freedom.

Assessing New York's 1821 constitution, Adams later objected to its implementation of adult male taxpayer suffrage (albeit excluding free black males, who still had to possess property in order to vote). By contrast, he praised the abolishment of the Council of Revision and Council of Appointment, bodies that invidiously brought together members of the legislature, executive and judiciary. Such institutions violated Adams' doctrine of "checks and balances" and strict separation of the three branches, which he considered the only reliable means to prevent governmental contamination by bribery and other forms of illicit influence.<sup>109</sup>

In December 1821, writing to Dutch Unitarian minister Francis Van der Kemp, he explained his mixed reaction to New York's new constitution. He opposed the expansion of suffrage to non-propertied males, believing, as he had since the Revolutionary period, that this invited wealthy candidates to attempt to win votes by bribing the laboring poor.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, he applauded the New York convention's efforts to achieve a more precise separation of powers. "The New York Convention have done two good things at least," he observed:

The abolition of the Council of Appointment and the Council of Revision. Their universal suffrage is not much deeper than ours. It will only occasion by and by a little more expence to gentlemen of fortune to carry their Elections, as it frequently cost two Gentlemen in England their whole fortunes, one to loose [sic] the other to gain the Election of a potwalloping [sic] burrough.

In Adams' view, suffrage extension invited a political situation similar to that in England's "potwaller boroughs," where any adult male resident was eligible to vote, whether he were a taxpaying householder or merely an impoverished lodger. Adams feared that such "potwalloping burroughs," as he called them, facilitated the legislature's control by the wealthy.<sup>111</sup> Thus, even in his last years Adams maintained his pessimistic view of human nature. He acknowledged the "ambition and avarice" of rich and poor alike.

In May 1821, writing to Richard Rush, U.S. minister to Great Britain, Adams informed him of his service in the recent convention, but not of the brevity of his stay. "In the course of forty years I have been called to assist in the formation of a Constitution for this state," which he viewed as a "kind of Architecture, an Art or Mistery very difficult to learn and Still harder to practice." Although suspecting that his senescence and isolated

situation limited his influence, he asserted that recent worldwide attempts at constitution-making “give me more Solitude than at my Age I ought to do, for nothing remains for me but submission & Resignation.”<sup>112</sup> “Nevertheless,” he continued, “I cannot wholly divest myself of anxiety for my children, my country and my Species.” Arguing that no “part of the world,” including the U.S., had “correct notions of the indispensable Machinery of a free Government,” he reiterated that both the “National and State Constitutions” suffered from the “Legislative and Executive Authorities” being “too much blended together.”<sup>113</sup>

This was another way of saying that the executive branch had too little power. He believed that the U.S. Senate’s authority to veto appointments to office made it impossible to “have a National President,” and forced the President to become “the Tool of a Party.” Likewise, he objected that the Massachusetts state senate could veto gubernatorial appointees; that the legislature appointed numerous state officials, including the governor’s council; and that the executive was excessively dependent on it. He exaggeratedly pointed out, “In Massachusetts the Legislature annually elect an executive Council, which renders the Governor a mere Doge of Venice . . . a mere Head of Wood.” Without mentioning the convention’s failure to institute religious freedom, he reiterated his belief in the necessity of a powerful, independent executive to a successful republic, concluding on a quasi-religious note, “Strait is the Gate and Narrow is the Way that leads to Liberty, and few Nations if any have found it.”<sup>114</sup>

## JOHN ADAMS: MASSACHUSETTS’ PAST RECAPTURED

In his own way, the elderly Adams wanted to return to the good old days, the seventeenth-century era of Massachusetts’ founding. This was the time of Pilgrims and Puritans, who seemed to him at least as virtuous as succeeding generations. In a letter of March 1822, he told Judge Richard Peters that he found inspiration in the writings of William Bradford of Plymouth; John Eliot’s memoir of his mission to the Natick Indians; Hubbard’s *History of New England*; and Edward Johnson’s *Wonder-working Providence*. These and other early histories were on loan to him from the Massachusetts Historical Society, and family members took turns reading them to the nearly-blind patriarch. Adams charmingly expressed his joy at discovering:

the most ancient memorials of emigrations to America. All the superstitions, fanaticism, quaintness, cant, barbarous poetry and uncouthness of style, have not prevented this reading exciting in

me as ardent an interest as I ever felt in reading Homer or Virgil, Milton, Pope or Shakespear. Silence, then, ye revolutionary heroes, patriots and Sages. Never boast of your superiority for services or sufferings or sacrifices. Our Hancocks and Washingtons never exceeded in disinterestedness dozens of emigrants to America two hundred years ago. In short the whole history of America for 200 years appears to me to exhibit an uniform general tenour of Character for intelligence, integrity, patience fortitude & public spirit. One generation has little pretentions for boasting over another.<sup>115</sup>

It did not occur to Adams that during the era of Puritan dominance from 1620 to 1686, the Puritan denomination alone possessed civil rights; nonconformists were exiled; and accused witches and Quakers were hanged for their threat to social and religious order.

Despite his ultimate embrace of religious orthodoxy, Adams' rational, intellectual side conceived a respect for "mythographers," his word for critics of the Bible who analyzed all religions objectively and scientifically. At least when writing to the aggressively deistic Jefferson, he denied the Trinity. In 1817, he went so far as to tell his friend uncharacteristically, "This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it."<sup>116</sup> But he immediately admitted that he was not serious about this statement.

In another revealing letter, to Harvard College chemistry professor John Gorham, he wrote, "I believe with Father Abraham and Sir Isaac Newton in the existence of Spirit distinct from Matter, and resign to the Universal Spirit the government of his Heavens and Earth."<sup>117</sup> Rejecting materialism, Adams poured his heart out to this scientist, confessing his belief in old-fashioned Puritan "special providences" in a way that he would never have done in writing to Jefferson. "The Material Universe is a chemical experiment," he asserted. "Its Author and conductor is now, ever was, and ever will be, the only perfect Chymist [sic] in the Universe. I believe he constantly superintends the operation, and interposes whenever, if ever, his Special Providence is necessary or beneficial."<sup>118</sup> Reiterating his contempt for Enlightenment *philosophes* and materialists, Adams continued, "Modern Philosophers say, Spirit is a word void of sense. I say Matter is a word void of sense."<sup>119</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Religion was not disestablished in Massachusetts until 1833 when Article of Amendment Number XI, which repealed Article III of the Declaration



of Rights, was ratified. Article XI stated that “the public worship of God” should be encouraged, and that the “several religious societies of this commonwealth, whether corporate or unincorporated . . . shall ever have the right to elect their pastors or religious teachers,” and erect their churches. Those who belonged to a religious society were expected to contribute their fair share to its expenses until they declared that they no longer wanted membership. Amendment XI concluded by proclaiming freedom of religion for all:

All religious sects and denominations, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good citizens of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law; and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law.<sup>120</sup>

Unlike Article III of the 1780 Declaration of Rights, it did not restrict religious protections to Christians; and it changed Adams’ anachronistic “subjects” to “citizens.” Nonetheless, the amendment was similar to Adams’ proposal, as made by Judge Parker. But the body of the amendment fleshed out Adams’ theoretical provisions, making clear that participation in religious activities would henceforth be entirely voluntarily. Indeed, had Adams been alive he might have felt some misgivings over permitting religious equality to non-Christians. Even into old age, Adams considered Christianity the only true religion. As he wrote his devout friend Rush in 1810, “Neither Savage nor civilized Man without a Revelation could ever have discovered or invented it.”<sup>121</sup>

Although Adams did not attempt to strengthen the state establishment at the 1820 Constitutional Convention, there is no compelling evidence that he attempted to abolish the Congregational Church’s preferred position. As John Witte has pointed out, this “mild and equitable establishment” had been congenial to Adams throughout his life.<sup>122</sup> Thus was Adams’ ambivalent quest for “perfect” religious freedom vindicated seven years after his death.

More generally, as a delegate to the 1820 Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, an episode of his life virtually invisible to historians, John Adams espoused some of the most progressive political beliefs in his life. Unfortunately, largely because of his age, he achieved little of permanence in the realms of more democratic modes of electing the Governor’s Council or bringing his state closer to a condition of religious freedom. On the other hand, his reputation as a great “Founding Father” had preceded him, contributing to temporary victories for some of his views at the Convention. Eventually,

illness, exasperation or both, precipitated his abrupt departure, negating his efforts for reform. Contrary to some of his biographers' claims, Adams did not propose to abolish the 1780 Constitution's grant of preferred status to the Congregational Church. This Protestant "establishment" was embodied in Article III, of which, as we have seen, in old age he retrospectively denied authorship. However, the few statements he made at the 1820 convention suggest that the moderation that characterized his political career was in evidence there, devoid of the occasional bluster and volatility of the past. He enfolded his rhetoric and actions with a modesty and humility that were often absent from his earlier performances. In many ways, despite its brevity, Adams' attendance at the 1820 Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, which historians have almost uniformly ignored, was one of the high points of his long, illustrious life.

HJM

## Notes

1. See John D. Cushing, "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780-1833," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 26 (April 1969): 169-190; Johann N. Neem, "The Elusive Common Good: Religion and Civil Society in Massachusetts, 1780-1833," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Autumn 2004): 381-417; William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1603-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); and Jerusha Jennings, "The Evolution of Religion in the Massachusetts State Constitution" (Master's thesis, Texas State University, 2007).
2. "The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony, 1646" in Franklyn S. Haiman, *Religious Expression and the American Constitution* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 2.
3. Cushing, 169-70.
4. Cushing, 170.
5. See Carla Gardina Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
6. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 220.
7. Adams quoted in John R. Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 82. From Adams' diary dated November 13, 1779.
8. "Religion and the Founding of the American Republic," <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel05.html> (accessed May 1, 2017).
9. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 is available online at <http://www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/ma-1780.htm> (accessed June 1, 2017). Since 1820, 120 "Articles of

Amendment” have been added. The most recent one, which disqualified incarcerated felons from voting, was approved by a vote of 60% in 2000.

10. Evan Thomas, “Founders Chic: Live from Philadelphia,” *Newsweek*, July 8, 2001, 48-51.

11. See Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein’s informative article on John Adams’ persona in recent memory, “The Adamases on Screen,” in David Waldstreicher, ed., *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to John and John Quincy Adams* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 487-509.

12. On John Adams’ sympathy for Unitarianism, see, for example, John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 191.

13. Arthur Scherr, “Thomas Jefferson’s Nationalist Vision of New England and the War of 1812,” *The Historian* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 31; Jefferson to Adams, January 22, 1821, in Lester J. Cappon, ed. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 569.

14. Arthur Scherr, “James Monroe and John Adams: An Unlikely ‘Friendship,’” *The Historian* 67, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 405-433. This time I cite Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1933), 132-33, 340-41; McCullough, 631-32; Harlow W. Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America, 1815-1836* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 35-36; and Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 191-95; John Adams to Jefferson, January 23, 1825, quoted in Scherr, “Unlikely Friendship,” 428.

15. Chinard, 341. In his brief discussion of Adams’ attendance at the Constitutional Convention (pp. 243-244), John R. Howe in his *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*, the most comprehensive study of Adams’ political ideology to date, makes no mention of Adams’ stance on religious issues at the convention. Howe merely describes his opposition to an expanded suffrage in Massachusetts, spending more time discussing Adams’ reaction to the New York Constitutional Convention of 1821.

16. Charles F. Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-1856), 627-28.

17. *Ibid.*, 628.

18. *Ibid.* See also Stanley F. Chyet, “The Political Rights of the Jews in the United States, 1776-1840,” *American Jewish Archives* 10, no. 1 (1958): 36-38.

19. Page Smith, *John Adams* (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 1129-1130, citing Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, Oct. 21, 1820, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA (hereafter abbreviated AFP).

20. See James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 445-446. This is also true of the important compendium, Richard Alan Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001).

21. Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: Norton, 1993); Joseph J. Ellis, *First Family: Abigail and John* (New York: Knopf, 2010).
22. McCullough, 632; John Adams to Mordecai Noah, July 31, 1818, in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1963), vol. 1, 12.
23. McCullough, 632. For Parker's presentation of Adams' amendment, discussed below, see *Journal of the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention* (Boston Advertiser, 1821), 193 (December 27, 1820) (hereafter cited as *Journal of the Convention*). The only important modern collection of documents relating to the 1820 Convention is Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Democracy, Liberty, and Property: The State Constitutional Conventions of the 1820's* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 3-124. Although useful, it does not mention Adams' proposal to bestow the "equal protection of the laws" on all religions.
24. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past: From the leaves of old journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883; Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), 62. This view was far different from Adams' famous statement at the beginning of the French Revolution, "I know not what to make of a republic of thirty million atheists" (John Adams to Richard Price, April 19, 1790, in Adams, ed., *Works* 9: 564). For another example of Adams' earlier denunciation of atheism, see his Discourses on Davila, quoted in George A. Peek, Jr., ed., *Political Writings of John Adams: Representative Selections* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberal Arts Press, 1954), 193-194; and Adams, ed., *Works* 4: 74-281.
25. Quincy, August 18, 1822 entry, 71-72 (1883 edition); 62 (1926 edition).
26. *Ibid.*, entry for Oct. 30, 1822, *ibid.*, 65 (1926 edition).
27. McCullough, 631-632. C. Bradley Thompson also ignores Adams' religious beliefs. He concludes that "in the end, the religion of John Adams was little more . . . than a religion of civic morality" that would keep the populace obedient to the laws and devoted to "a Lockean regime founded on the law of nature and nations." C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 23. Indeed, Thompson's revisionist interpretation of Adams as epitomizing Enlightenment rationalism and as being an unerring follower of Bacon, Newton, and Locke seems to have confused Adams with Jefferson. Arthur Scherr, "Thomas Jefferson versus the Historians: Christianity, Atheistic Morality, and the Afterlife," *Church History* 83, no. 1 (March 2014): 60-109 contrasts Adams' religious ideas with Jefferson's.
28. Grant, 446, citing *Journal of Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of Delegates* (Boston, 1821) (hereafter cited as *Journal of Debates and Proceedings*), 193.
29. Grant, 446. For the provision of the 1780 Constitution that promised to protect the individual's right to worship God, see Article II of Adams' version of the Declaration of Rights in Gregg L. Lint et al., eds., *Adams Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), vol. 8, 238. (All future references to Lint are to this volume.)

30. For one of the few summaries of Adams' religious attitudes, see Robert B. Everett, "The Mature Religious Thought of John Adams," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (1966): 49-57.
31. John Witte Jr., "One Public Religion, Many Private Religions: John Adams and the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution," in *The Founders on God and Government*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach et al. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 23-52, 25.
32. 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): 217.
33. Adams to Benjamin Rush, October 25, 1809, in John A. Schutz and Douglas G. Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966), 158-159.
34. Adams to Joseph Ward, January 8, 1810, Adams Papers, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, NY.
35. Adams to Jefferson, July [3], 1813, in Cappon, 349.
36. See Edward Coles' memoir of his visit to Adams at Braintree in 1811. Adams confessed that he found it difficult to forgive Jefferson for defeating him for the presidency in 1800. Edward Coles to Adams, quoted in Henry S. Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, NY, 1858), vol. 3, 639-640.
37. Adams to Jefferson, July 13, 1813, in Cappon, 356.
38. Adams to Jefferson, May 1, 1812, in Cappon, 301.
39. Adams to Jefferson, June 14, 1813, in Cappon, 329.
40. Adams to Jefferson, June 10, 1813, in Cappon, 327.
41. Jefferson to Adams, January 22, 1821, in Cappon, 569.
42. Adams to Jefferson, Feb. 3, 1821, in Cappon, 571-72. Newspapers often printed "speeches" that were not correct word-for-word, and editors added their own rhetorical flourishes.
43. Adams to Jefferson, January 23, 1825, in Cappon, 607-608, and Adams, ed., *Works*, 10: 415-16.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Adams to Jefferson, September 14, 1813, in J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, vol. 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 500.
48. Adams to Jefferson, February 3, 1821, in Cappon, 571. For an example of Jefferson's criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, which he considered an obstacle to human progress, see Jefferson to William Short, May 15, 1815, in Looney 8: 490.
49. Adams to Henry Channing, November 3, 1820, in Adams, ed., *Works*, 10: 392-393.
50. *Ibid.*

51. Josiah Quincy in *Figures of the Past* (1883 edition), 86, inaccurately states that Adams was unanimously chosen president of the convention. *Journal of the Convention*, 8, recording the proceedings on Nov. 15, 1820, states that Adams received 335 out of 353 votes cast.

52. Adams to Henry Channing, November 3, 1820, in Adams, *Works*, 10: 392-93; and Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus* (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 222-223.

53. Adams to Jefferson, June 25, 1813, Cappon 2: 334; Frank Edward Manuel, *Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 278-79. Adams criticized the Unitarians for being unduly aggressive in seeking power over Boston's Congregationalist parishes. For example, see Adams to Jedidiah Morse, May 15, 1815, quoted in Donald H. Stewart and George P. Clark, "Misanthrope or Humanitarian? John Adams in Retirement," *New England Quarterly* 28 (1955): 227.

54. Adams to Henry Channing, November 3, 1820, in Adams, *Works*, 10: 392-393.

55. Chinard, 341, is cited in Cappon, 569, note 39.

56. Chinard, 341 cites what appears to be a non-existent "speech" by Adams in Adams, *Works* 1: 626, which cannot be found there, other than a brief statement that Adams made declining the presidency of the convention. Surprisingly, Chinard, who in his time was a noted Jefferson scholar and edited volumes of Jefferson's correspondence with his French colleagues, also mistakenly wrote that Adams apologized to the convention for "boggling and blundering more than a young fellow just rising to speak at the bar" (341). However, the source of Adams' self-effacing comment was not a convention speech, but his letter to Jefferson of February 3, 1821, in which he disparaged his achievements at the convention, stating, "After a total desuetude for 40 years I boggled and blundered more than a young fellow just rising to speak at the bar" (Cappon, 571-72).

57. *Journal of Debates and Proceedings in the convention of Delegates chosen to revise the constitution of Massachusetts: begun and holden at Boston, November 15, 1820, and continued by adjournment to January 9, 1821* (expanded edition; Boston, MA: Daily Advertiser, 1853), 330. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, indisposition can mean "unfitness, unsuitableness, incapacity, mild illness, or aversion." It is possible that Adams left the convention early because he feared that taking a stand during the controversial proceedings would damage his reputation. By contrast, the convention records said that Thomas S. Baylies, the delegate from the town of Wellington in Bristol County, departed because of "ill health."

58. Adams to John Jay, May 13, 1821, AFP, reel 124.

59. Adams to Nathaniel Bowditch, November 4, 1820, AFP, reel 124.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Journal of the Convention*, 193 (December 27, 1820). Article III of the Massachusetts constitution's Bill of Rights may be found online (with a few misprints) at <https://malegislature.gov> (accessed September 8, 2017) and in Oscar and Mary Handlin's indispensable compilation, *The Popular Sources of Political Authority: Documents on*

*the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 442-443.

62. Quincy (1888), 88. Several editions of this volume exist; some are available online.

63. Quincy (1888), 86-87; Quincy (1926), 74-76.

64. John Adams to Francis Van der Kemp, February 12, 1821, AFP, reel 124.

65. *Journal of the Convention*, 193 (December 27, 1820). In what is probably the most detailed scholarly account of the convention, Harlow Walker Sheidley's "'Preserving the Old Fabrick': The Massachusetts Conservative Elite and the Constitutional Convention of 1820-21," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, third series, 103 (1991): 114-137, there is no mention of Adams' proposals on religious freedom.

66. *Journal of the Convention*, 193 (December 27, 1820); see *Journal of the Convention* 209 (December 28, 1820) for Ward N. Boylston's identical resolution, except for using "law" instead of "laws."

67. *Journal of the Convention*, 192-193. Williams' resolution, presented just before that of Parker/Adams, stated that "every denomination of christians, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the Commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law, and no subordination of any sect or denomination to another, shall ever be established by law."

68. *Journal of Debates and Proceedings*, 461.

69. *Journal of the Convention* (1821 edition), 209.

70. *Journal of Debates and Proceedings* (1853 edition), 470.

71. *Ibid.*, 557, 559. The convention submitted for popular ratification an amendment that retained most of Article III except for eliminating the minor provision that the legislature theoretically had power to enforce church attendance. The amendment would have also extended the legislature's authority to direct the towns to collect educational taxes to include "all public Christian teachers of piety, religion, and morality," not only "Protestants." Thus, it continued to regard non-Christians as somewhat illegitimate. However, this proposed amendment was defeated by a majority of 8,482, indicating public restiveness under the Congregationalist establishment. "Article the First," in *Journal of Debates and Proceedings*, 613-614; Peterson, 31-49, 124. See also Sheidley, "Fabrick," 125. Sheidley notes that the Democratic-Republicans, although composing the majority of convention delegates, bickered too much among themselves to overcome skillful Federalist parliamentary maneuvering. Although the Jeffersonians, in contrast to the Federalists, were eager to disestablish the Congregationalist Church, their leaders, including Lincoln and Dearborn, generally favored cooperation with the Federalists. George Blake, another leading Democratic-Republican delegate, despite being a Unitarian, supported the concept of an established church. *Ibid.*, 121, 125-126, 131.

72. *Journal of the Convention*, December 28, 1820 (1821 edition), 212.

73. *Ibid.*



74. The complexities of the issue of a state-funded established church are pointed out in such studies as Peter S. Field, *Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); and Nathan S. Rives, "Is Not This a Paradox? Public Morality and the Unitarian Defense of State-Supported Religion in Massachusetts, 1806-1833," *New England Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (June 2013): 232-265. None of these works mentions John Adams.

75. *Journal of the Convention*, 104-105 (Dec. 7, 1820). Unfortunately, the detailed annotation in Lint et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 8: 266, note 58, 267, note 57, creates the impression that the 1780 Convention rejected Adams' placement in the committee's draft constitution in October 1779 that all government officials adhere to Christianity.

76. *Journal of the Convention*, 104 (Dec. 7, 1820).

77. "Articles of Amendment," printed in Francis N. Thorpe, ed., *Federal and State Constitutions* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), vol. 3, 1912 (Article VI). When submitted to the voters, the repeal of the religious test passed by a vote of 13,782 to 12,480. Peterson, 124 ("Recapitulation").

78. Lint, 230.

79. Lint, 246, 248, 266, note 58, 267, note 67.

80. See Lint, 246, 248, 250, 254, 255-256.

81. See Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, Part the Second, Chapter VI, in Handlin, 467-468.

82. For some examples of Adams' draft imposing a "Christian" religious requirement on state legislators, see Section 2, Article V (Senate) and Section 3, Article III (House of Representatives) in "The Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, to be laid before the Convention of Delegates," ca. Oct. 28, 1779, in Lint, 246, 248. For Adams' aggressive support of Congregationalism in Revolutionary Massachusetts, see, for example, Arthur Scherr, "John Adams Confronts Quakers and Baptists During the Revolution: A Paradox of the Quest for Liberty," *Journal of Church and State* 59, no. 2 (June 2017), 256-279.

83. Thorpe, vol. 3. Despite Adams' insistence in his disputes with Quakers and Baptists in 1774 on the popularity of the established Protestant church, Article III of the Constitution of 1780, which made it the state church, was one of the constitution's most unpopular provisions. Despite receiving a majority, it did not receive the required two-thirds vote of the electorate necessary for its inclusion in the constitution, but the convention extralegally declared it ratified anyway. Lint 262, note 12; Elisha Douglass, *Rebels and Democrats* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 202-203, 209.

84. Adams to Francis van der Kemp, February 12, 1821, AFP, reel 124. Adams described himself as a "church-going animal" in a letter to Benjamin Rush, August 28, 1811, published in Adams, ed., *Works*, 9: 636. For Adams' religious orthodoxy, church attendance, and his recourse to quoting the Book of Revelation during his wife's dying moments, see Grant, 439, 442.

85. Adams to Francis van der Kemp, February 12, 1821, AFP, reel 124.
86. Adams to Jefferson, February 3, 1821, quoted in Cappon, 571.
87. John Adams to William D. Williamson, February 25, 1812, Maine Historical Society, quoted in Lint, 262, note 12, and in Elisha P. Douglass, 193, note 15, from Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, 1873-1875, 301. The version that Adams (or possibly his son Thomas Boylston Adams, or a grandchild) copied into his letterbook was slightly different: "The Article respecting religion as I said before was the only Article which I omitted to draw. I could not satisfy my own judgment with any Article that I thought would be accepted: and farther that some of the Clergy, or older and graver Persons than myself would be more likely to hit the Taste of the Public." Adams Letterbooks, AFP, reel 118.
88. Lint, 230.
89. Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, October 12, 1779, quoted in Lint, 198; John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, November 4, 1779, and Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 4, 1779, quoted in Lint, 230.
90. The most famous example of Adams' "lapse of memory," or what historian Robert McGlone has variously called his "false" memory, "aphoristic memory," or "ersatz memory," was his insistence, in a letter to his former enemy Timothy Pickering in 1822, that he demanded that the Continental Congress select Jefferson as a member of the five-man committee that composed the Declaration of Independence; and that he personally chose Jefferson to draft the Declaration. These statements were erroneous. The committee unanimously chose Jefferson. Robert E. McGlone, "Deciphering Memory: John Adams and the Authorship of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of American History* 65, no. 2 (September 1998): 411-38, esp. 436-38; Adams to Timothy Pickering, August 22, 1822, in Adams, ed., *Works*, 2: 512-515.
91. Diary of Josiah Quincy, May 31, 1820, quoted in Edmund Quincy, *Life of Josiah Quincy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1867), 379, and in Lint, 262.
92. See Scherr, "John Adams Confronts Quakers and Baptists."
93. As Chinard exaggeratingly put it, "On this point as on so many others, Adams had finally come to agree completely with Jefferson" (341).
94. Among many biographies, McCullough, 602-650, stresses the importance Adams attached to his epistolary friendship with Jefferson in his last years. For Adams on "Montezillo," see *ibid.*, 606. For other accounts that emphasize Adams' enjoyment of the revived friendship, see Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, chapter 4; and Dumas Malone, *The Sage of Monticello* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1981), chapter 7. Aside from Cappon's edition of the Adams-Jefferson Letters, at least two books are devoted to discussing their friendship: John Murray Allison, *Adams and Jefferson: The Story of a Friendship* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), and Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1976).
95. *Journal of the Convention* (1821 edition), 105, 108-109.

to enable them to move for a reconsideration of the vote later when circumstances favored them.

104. Adams to David Sewall, January 10, 1821, AFP, reel 124. Adams was replying to a letter of December 20, 1820 in which Sewall observed, "It gives me real pleasure to see the tribute of esteem and respect, offered you from the convention of Massachusetts. A collection of Persons, I really believe, as Wise learned and patrioticas ever convened in New England." AFP reel 124, also available at "National Archives Founders Online," <https://founders.archives.gov> (accessed August 29, 2017).

105. Adams to John Jay, May 13, 1821, and Adams to Judge Richard Peters, March 31, 1822, AFP, reel 124; Howe, *Changing Political Thought*, 243.

106. Adams to Jefferson, May 19, 1821, quoted in Cappon, 573. For Jefferson's support for direct democracy in his old age, see Charles M. Wiltse, *The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1935); Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 149-165; Richard K. Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984); Jefferson to Dupont de Nemours, April 24, 1816, to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, and to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1984), 1384-1388, 1391-1403.

107. John Adams to John Jay, May 13, 1821, AFP, reel 124.

108. *Ibid.*

109. Adams to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, December 13, 1821, AFP, reel 124.

110. *Ibid.* Adams distrusted the rich as well as the poor. He believed that if all classes of society had the vote, the poor would despoil the rich, come under their control, or surrender the government to unprincipled demagogues. See his Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States (1788) in Adams, ed., *Works*, 4: 284, 298, 339, 358, 404-405, 444, 468, and 6: 11, 25, 56-57; and Manning J. Dauer, *Adams Federalists* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), chapter 3.

111. Adams to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, December 13, 1821, AFP, reel 124. "Potwaller boroughs" were election districts in English towns where adult males were allowed to vote even if they possessed no landed property, and merely owned a "pot" to boil water.

112. John Adams to Richard Rush, May 14, 1821, AFP, reel 124.

113. *Ibid.*

114. *Ibid.* Adams exaggerated the extent of the legislature's power to appoint the governor's council. The mode of election stipulated by the 1780 constitution was that, voting in districts, the same electorate that chose state senators would simultaneously nominate forty candidates for the executive council. The two houses of the legislature would then select nine individuals from this list to serve on the council. Occasionally, the legislature chose state senators to serve as councilors, but the senators could reject the appointment if they preferred to remain in the senate.

115. Adams to Judge Richard Peters, March 31, 1822, AFP, reel 124.

116. Adams to Jefferson, April 19, 1817, in Cappon, 2: 509.
117. Adams to Professor John Gorham, January 28, 1817, both quoted in Manuel, 279-80.
118. Adams to John Gorham, January 28, 1817, printed in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (November-December 1867), 90. By “materialism,” I mean simply the philosophical position that all things and beings, including “God” and “the soul,” are composed of tangible matter, capable of being physically grasped in some way, and that ghost-like spirits and invisible souls do not exist.
119. *Ibid.*
120. Amendment XI, 1780 Massachusetts Convention, passed in 1833, in Thorpe, vol. 3: 1914.
121. Adams to Benjamin Rush, January 21, 1810, in “National Archives Founders Online.” For Adams’ conviction that Christianity was superior to other religions in being based on a “fresh revelation,” see also Adams to F.A. Van der Kemp, December 27, 1816, in Adams, *Works*, 10: 235.
122. Witte, “A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion,” 213.