

Swedenborg and the Great American Experiment

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My mother is one of those women who relate through self effacement. For example, after being complemented on a wonderful Sunday dinner, she is likely to respond:

“I always serve peas with this meal; I don’t know why I served beans this time. Peas would have been much better don’t you think? Why didn’t I serve peas! ”

One of the things she regrets is that she passed up the opportunity to name me William Stark Stinson. In my family, William Stark is the name traditionally given to the first born male of each generation.

“Why didn’t I name you William Stark? I’m sure you would have appreciated it more than your cousin”.

Why William Stark?

Every New Hampshire school child learns the story of how on April 28, 1752 John Stark was captured by Indians while on a hunting trip near what is now Rumney, NH. He was used as bait to lure his brother, William, and William’s brother in-law David Stinson, into a trap. At the last minute, John broke free, knocked the Indians’ guns into the air just as they fired, saving his brother’s life.

But not, alas, Stinson’s.

Now some of you may be wondering how this event could result in a family name handed down through the generations, much less being taught to every school child.

How many of you know who John Stark is?
General John Stark, hero of the Battle of Bennington?
Still not ringing a bell?

Let me try another tack. How many of you know the NH state motto? It’s on all the license plates.

Yes, “Live Free or Die” was uttered by none other than John Stark!

(Actually he said “Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils”.)

David did get a brook, a lake, and a mountain named after him. I am proud to share my surname with a mountain. A mountain memorializing my relative; the one famed for *not* being saved by John Stark, famous Revolutionary War hero!

Fortunately, there were other Stinsons around at the time, and one John Stinson became a local and state leader, one of NH’s first supporters of Thomas Jefferson and, according to the History of the Town of Dunbarton, a “strenuous advocate for religious freedom.”

The light of the “Founding Fathers” -- Franklin, Adams, Madison, Jefferson -- shines so bright it is difficult to remember they couldn’t have accomplished what they did without the support of men and women like John Stinson in all the towns and wilderness settlements of the 13 Colonies. By reading State Constitutions one can obtain an insight into the thinking of those lesser lights on a variety of topics, including religious freedom.

New Hampshire has the distinction of adopting an interim constitution on January 5, 1776, making NH the first of the Colonies to declare independence from Great Britain. They then argued for another 7 years (mostly about how to create a government without giving it any actual power) before adopting a final constitution in October 1783. You may think 7 years is a pretty long argument, but remember the Bill of Rights wasn’t adopted until 8 years after that.

The NH constitution contains some remarkable statements. For example, Article 10 states that, should the government become tyrannical; the people have, not just the right, *but the duty*, to take up arms and overthrow the government. Beat *that*, Berkeley City Council!

Of more interest are Articles 1, 2 and 3. These declare that all people are born free and independent, and have inherent rights … not privileges granted by kings – or by the Constitution, but rights that are an intrinsic ingredient of being human. People may voluntarily surrender some of those rights to society in return for society’s protection of other rights – this is the idea of the Social Contract, most famously explicated by John Locke.

But the epiphany comes in Article 4. Article 4 asserts that some rights *cannot* be surrendered to society, because there is nothing of equal value that society can return. The one such right listed is the *Right of Conscience*.

Think about that for a moment. The framers of this constitution are stating that there is **NOTHING** you can be given that is as valuable as your right to develop and hold personal beliefs of what is right and what is wrong.

Nothing as important as the freedom to pursue in your own way the answers to the ultimate questions of life and meaning. Not food, not shelter, not life itself. Nothing.

This is the meaning of “live free or die”.

It is so difficult to understand what life was like back then, looking as we do through our lens of modern culture. Imagine. We started as a society where it was a fact as obvious as the sun rises in the east that God intended us to believe what our betters told us to believe. Where it was accepted fact that the best way to support religion was to put the might of the state behind it.

Just a few years later we believed that an *individual’s* right to approach god as he or she saw fit was *sacred*. That this is one place where the State **shall not tread**.

And that true religion would flourish as a result.

This is the Great American Experiment. Not democracy... that had been done before. But the United States may be the first society built on the principle of religious freedom.

How did this come about?

We tell our children the colonists came to the New World seeking religious freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. They may have come here to escape religious persecution, but religious freedom was not on their minds. Before boot hit beach, theocracy was established.

The Puritans were the most notorious. Only members of their Church were allowed to vote. And Church elders decided if you were “pious” enough to

be *allowed* to join. Catholics were driven from Massachusetts with a whip to their backs. Quakers were hung by the neck from the trees of Boston Commons.

The Puritans were not unique. Every colony had an established religion in one form or another. Churches were supported by tax dollars. Dissenters experienced intense discrimination if not outright persecution. The Pope was the anti-Christ.

What caused the change?

The religious fervor known as “the Great Awakening” resulted in the creation of many new denominations. Witnessing the abuse meted out on these groups began to disgust a growing number of people, James Madison among them. Some of these new sects saw Jesus’ teachings that “my kingdom is not of this world”, and “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s” as a Biblical injunction against the mingling of Church and State. As a result the Baptists and other forerunners of today’s Evangelical Christians were among the most fervent supporters of the strictest separation between Church and State.

Some factors were purely practical. The Continental Congress discovered it had almost as many religions represented as there were delegates. They could either “hang together or hang separately”. Washington, fearing invasion from the north, sought to minimize British support there. Consequently, he vigorously and successfully fought to quell anti-Catholic sentiments throughout the States. Needing a truly national force, he rigorously enforced religious tolerance within the army.

For Madison, even the radical idea of religious tolerance missed the mark. He believed that true faith must flow from a free mind. Holding to a different faith was not a privilege to be tolerated by a monarch or even an enlightened majority; it was an intrinsic right. When the phrase “religious tolerance” crossed his desk, he would slash out “tolerance” and pen in “freedom”. “If this freedom is abused,” he wrote, “it is an offense against God, not against man.”

Both Jefferson and Madison looked at history and concluded Christianity was most vibrant in its early years but became moribund and corrupt once adopted as the state religion by Constantine. They convincingly argued that

truth and good eventually win in a free marketplace of ideas, and government power only props-up falsehood and weakness.

Religious freedom was precious to these men in part because they were each on their own spiritual journeys.

Washington credited the intervention of God for his victories and blamed moral weakness for his defeats. He forbade swearing in the Continental Army. Yet he never took communion. During his presidency, his minister gave a sermon with a thinly veiled rebuke of this practice. Washington stopped going to church on communion Sunday.

In his youth Franklin thought it beneath the dignity of God to meddle in the affairs of men and concluded that God must have created deputy gods to look after each of the many planets that exist throughout the universe.

Jefferson believed the clergy purposely obfuscated religious teachings and struck alliances with tyrants to protect their own privileges. He called Jesus “the greatest moral teacher the world had ever seen, or ever would see”, but denied his divinity. Jefferson assembled his own bible, cutting the words of Jesus from several translations of the bible and pasting them into a notebook. He was convinced that if it were not for corruptions introduced by priests, starting with Paul, all the world would have long ago accepted Jesus’ teachings. It is interesting to note that the New Testament used by the other major branch of Swedenborgianism, the General Church, contains only Mathew, Mark, Luke, John and Revelations, excluding all the writings of Paul.

Jefferson’s Library contained at least two volumes of Swedenborg’s works, including “Apocalypse Revealed”. He invited John Hargrove, the first Swedenborgian minister ordained in the United States, to give public lectures in the halls of Congress on at least two occasions.

Adams, while a Unitarian, had a hard time shaking his Puritan roots. Throughout his presidency he believed government support of religion was necessary, although such aid should be distributed without favoring one sect over the other. He frequently enlisted Almighty aid in the battles of his administration. This resulted in a bitter struggle between Adams and

Jefferson with Adams' operatives calling Jefferson an "Infidel" and declaring "a vote for Jefferson is a vote against God". However this backfired and Adams later wrote that his position "alarmed and alienated ... Quakers, Anabaptists, Mennonists, Moravians, Swedenborgians, Methodists, Catholicks, Episcopalian, Arians, Socinians, Armenians, & & &, Atheists and Deist."

The Founding Fathers used their religious freedom to study, contemplate, debate, and most significantly, to change. Adams, perhaps, changed the most. In his 80's Adams worked to remove state support of religion from the Massachusetts state constitution. He studied all the world's religions and wrote "men ought (after they have examined with unbiased judgments every system of religion, and chosen one system, on their own authority, for themselves) to avow their opinions and defend them with boldness." The Founding Fathers confirmed, as we would say in Swedenborgian terms, that each individual is a "church specific" pursuing a path of spiritual growth.

Interestingly, the Founding Fathers also converged on a definition of the Church Universal. Jefferson succinctly laid out this common creed in 1822: "That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion."

They saw that the "one path" to enlightenment was the freedom to pursue "many paths". And that these many paths/one path lead to a single mountain top, expressible in three words:

"Love thy neighbor".

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During the Revolutionary War exhortations that "god is on our side" were routinely used to rally the troops. There was a common belief that to enlist in the Continental Army was to enlist in Christ's Army. Many thought God had singled out the nation for a special role in history, and with some reason. Washington escaped without harm from so many perilous situations he once observed with amazement "by the all powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation."

Their early jingoistic rhetoric may be a reflection of the irrationality of a rag-tag collection of colonies challenging one of the world's great and rising powers. In later years, the Founding Fathers repudiated their belief that the United States held a special place in God's eye. Adams wrote in 1812 "there is no special Providence for us. We are not a chosen people that I know of".

While denouncing chauvinism, I believe there was an essential truth hidden in their early belief that God had a special role for the nation.

In one of his visions, Emanuel Swedenborg saw a crystal-walled church building that represented the New Jerusalem, or New Church, prophesied in Revelation. A church made possible by the understanding of the Word he was bringing to the world. Above the door was the Latin phrase "Nunc licet" which he knew to mean "Now it is permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith". "Nunc Licet" is the quintessential Swedenborg sound bite. It expresses the knowledge that we now have the tools to safely dispense with the prejudice, dogmatism and brutality of blind belief and to study, question and reason our way to true faith.

But knowledge, or discernment, isn't sufficient. Discernment must direct intentionality, or will, to give form and substance in the natural world to this revelation. Swedenborg needed a Jefferson to take the celestial "it is permitted" and transform it into the words now carved in the white Georgian marble of the Jefferson Memorial: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man".

This then, is the miracle of the American Experiment. Because they had to struggle through inauspicious beginnings, full of bigotry, dogmatism, hate and fear, a society was created dedicated to nurturing each and every person on their spiritual journey. The fledgling American nation demonstrated to the world that, against all belief, the best way to support those journeys, to encourage religion to flourish, is to accept that God meant it when he gave us free will, and no earthly power should attempt to thwart it in matters of conscience.

In this way, the United States became part of the cycle of repentance, reformation and regeneration creating the New Church. For according to

Swedenborg, the second coming of Christ is not so much an event as a journey. The Founding Fathers and thousands of others throughout the 13 states carried us forward a giant's stride. But, as they well understood, they did not complete the task. It is a task we, today, inherit. It is a task we should face with humility from the recognition that regeneration is a gift from God, but also with enthusiasm and joy from the beauty and majesty of what we are creating.

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Once bitter political enemies, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson became in old age friends again. Through correspondence they explored many issues, in particular, the blessings of religious freedom. They firmly believed their friendship would continue in the next life. In a letter to Adams on September 4, 1823, Jefferson painted an image of the two of them standing at the windows of heaven. "You and I shall look down from another world on these glorious achievements to man", Jefferson wrote, "which will add to the joys even of heaven."

Three years later, on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826, both men entered that blissful state.

Matthew 7: 7-8

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened.

Matthew 22:35-50

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, trying him:

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?

And he said to him: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second like unto it is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments the whole law hangs, and the prophets

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Everything spiritual of the church that enters man in freedom, and is received with freedom, remains; but not the reverse. That which is received by man with freedom remains in him, because freedom belongs to his will; and because it belongs to his will it also belongs to his love. ... From these few remarks it is clear that the interior will is the man himself, for in it is the very being and essence of his life; while the understanding is the form thereof whereby the will renders its love visible. Everything that man loves and wills from love is free; for whatever proceeds from the love of the internal will is his life's delight; and because this is the being of his life, it is also his very own [proprium]; and this is why that which is received with the freedom of this will, remains, for it adds itself to what is his own. On the contrary, anything that is introduced into man when he is not in freedom is not thus received. ...

But it must be well understood that the spiritual things of the Word and church which man imbibes from love, and which his understanding confirms are what remain in him, but not so things civil and political; because

spiritual things ascend into the highest region of the mind, and there take form. This is because the Lord's entrance into man with Divine truths and goods is there, and that region is like a temple in which He resides.