

An image from the HBO series based on the David McCullough biography of John Adams seems to illustrate the terms of our twenty-first century faith, what we might call “postmodern Christian faith.” It is of a flag, one of the many being blandished by the Sons of Liberty in Adam’s home town of Boston, brought out to rally the people when the die had been cast, when the last appeal to the crown had been rebuffed. On the flag appears a tree and beneath it the words “Appeal to Heaven.”

At a time when the traditional bonds between people and monarch were strained, being wrenched apart, the Appeal was being made directly to God. This was apparently the same God referred to in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence as the source and origin of the rights being defended. The law to which Adams so clearly looks (“I seek a nation of laws not of men”) is to be derived from divine grace.

I recall a conversation I had with a young New England churchman at a dinner party not long ago. I was trying to articulate the relationship I understand between Christianity and “liberal democracy,” the kind of society and government that the Declaration and the flow of American history has led us to. I was keenly aware of the possibility of being misunderstood, of being mistaken for a fundamentalist, as one who claims that this is a Christian nation. “Let me try to be clear.” I began, “Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t believe that we are a *Christian nation*! But what I do claim is that democracy and its current secular expression is the fruit of the Gospel.” My friend immediately jumped to the very conclusion that I had specifically disavowed. “Wait a minute,” he protested with considerable vehemence, “You’re not one of those people who believes that this is a *Christian nation*.” Yet, the cultural background has made such a discourse extremely difficult by insisting on certain labels and categories, camps and points of view, that make a more thoughtful discussion rare, to say the least.

The point I wanted to make then, and I want to make now is that the very technology and economy, beginning in Adams’ time to have a global reach, with tariffs and taxation, exports and imports made possible by British merchant ships and the power of empire, these were the very things that allowed the British subjects of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to begin to imagine a new relation with the state. Their experience and the great adventure that has followed constitutes an historic secularization, a desacralization of the monarchy, that was enabled by the legacy of centuries of European Christian development. My point is that Christianity is, of its essence, a movement toward secularization, for laicization, an overturning of dogma, the traditional sacred and authoritarianism.

The American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence (however couched, as we must admit that it is, in religious rhetoric, in the language of radical Christianity, free of the mediation of priest and divine surrogate ruler) are clear expressions of the logic and the trajectory of the Christian movement. But this is not to say, as my companion assumed I was about to, that such a break with tradition and fealty to the divine sovereignty of George III was in any way a withdrawal from, or a reaction to the New Enlightenment Learning, the radical

freethinking represented by the likes of Thomas Paine and to some extent Jefferson. This “Appeal to Heaven” was instead a decidedly non-religious or (as thousands of loyalist Anglican clergy were to testify) even anti-religious event.

With the Declaration of Independence there comes a kind of assertion of humanity “come of age,” exposed to the world without the comforts of crown, church, or empire. Not the socially conditioned jig or dirge the children in Jesus parable rehearse in imitation of their elders, this is something so new that it has not been revealed to the powerful gentry, the wise rulers, but rather to foolish outcast rebels. However we may rightly interpret the event as against religion and religion’s God, and certainly against the church, this act was nevertheless a genuine event in the history of the contagious power of the gospel.

So much for 1776. Let me insist as well that the consecration of V. Gene Robinson, to take the controversial event most on the minds of Anglicans the world over, is, likewise, an event that is the fruit of the gospel. Christianity, if I may speak in this way to refer to those of us who claim to follow Christ in his Church, has a choice to make regarding such events of history that seem to be coming more rapidly and more profoundly challenging our perspective and our ability as a whole to integrate them. In the United States the issue of Gay Rights is taking center stage. We could choose to join with those who combat a claimed conspiracy of the so-called “homosexual agenda.” But to do that is to indulge in a form of blaming and scapegoating, securing our identity among the orthodox by asserting some kind of righteousness, by standing “over-against” some other. The truth is at once more subtle and more disturbing. It is that through a simple knowing, a caring and compassion for those members of our families and those with whom work and worship, a compassion for those who discover themselves to be somehow irremediably different, has opened toward this outcast “other.” And this, largely before the church took a stand, had begun to open up our cultural attitudes. So that the job of the Church once again, especially where civil legal understandings have already been reordered, is to acknowledge what the society has already deemed blessed.

That same movement of compassion and openness (call it a “friendship” over “traditional righteousness” attitude) has come to transform the fear and violent hatred that has historically characterized our conversation of same-sex relationships as “queer” and continues to in so many other areas of our Anglican Communion. Again, my point is not so much to raise this controversial issue any more than it was to talk above about the divine right of Kings. It is to point out that the event of the crucifixion and resurrection, what we call the Pascal Mystery, has accomplished the salvation of the world. And that that salvation continues to be experienced as an apocalyptic breaking down of our cultural traditions and settled verities. The tsunami of the gospel flowing through history from the cross and resurrection is what we might call a generalized secularization, a flattening, where we have seen religion become spirituality, priesthood become laity, law become charity, and on and on. Far from a defeat, it can be seen as the kenotic action of the incarnation. This grand movement of the self-emptying God has little to do with and depends not at all on the church. Except that, with the benefit of scripture, tradition, and the sacraments, it is our task to interpret the signs of this in-breaking of the kingdom and to help comfort and care for those who are dislocated by this globalizing, universalizing, leveling loss of the life and reality we all have known .

I love youth mission trips for many reasons. One is because I can often glimpse a time-lapse opening up of kids and adults sharing and partnering in extraordinary relationships. Now the Group Workcamps Foundation trips our parish takes reflect for our sophisticated affluent kids a kind of “industrial strength” religion they aren’t used to. The intentionally framed evangelical devotions and the professionally produced evening programs work very hard to deepen the participants relationships with God in Christ. And they do a good job. So I was recently both surprised and delighted to learn that one of our young people, in fact the one with the most experience (this was her third year), whenever asked would proudly announce that she was an “atheist.”

That reminds me of the early followers of Jesus who, because they refused to worship the gods of those who lived around them and bow to the powers and principalities, were called “atheists.” Genuine Christianity, it seems to me, is a journey into atheism; it is the *apophatic* challenge of facing the loss of an earlier certainty. Just as Jesus on the cross cried out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me,” to be really a follower of Jesus means to let go of the comforts and supports of a familiar God. It means to even become willing to let go of your atheism to the extent that it is in any way an anti-religious crutch to help you claim your identity in the increasingly strange and challenging postmodern world. And it means in relationships of encounter and conversation to extend a radical form of hospitality which eagerly anticipates not only learning from the other, but even the possibility of being transformed or converted by the other.