

THE JAYS AND RELIGION

*A Talk Given For the 200th Anniversary of the Construction of
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York*

John Jay's religious background was entirely Protestant. Jay's ancestry was three-quarters Dutch, but the part that had the greatest impact on whom he became was French Huguenot. The bloody French religious wars of the sixteenth century had been brought to a tense close with Henri IV's issuance of the Edict of Nantes in 1598, which decreed toleration for France's Calvinist minority. Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict in 1685 resulted in a new wave of oppression of the Protestants, which included the Jays.

John Jay's paternal grandfather, Augustus Jay, was born in La Rochelle, France, into a family of sea traders. John Jay used the word "opulent" to describe their level of prosperity. Pierre Jay, Augustus's father, was pressured to convert to Catholicism after the Edict was revoked. When he refused, military men were quartered in his house, to live with his family, creating an intolerable situation. Pierre sent his wife and most of his children to freedom in England, in violation of a law forbidding the Protestant laity to leave the country. After the government discovered what he had done, he was imprisoned and his house was confiscated by the French crown. Influential Catholic friends got him released, and he managed to flee from France and join his family in England. However, one of his children, Augustus, was away at sea at the time on family business, and was unaware of all of this. Upon Augustus's return to La Rochelle, he discovered what had happened to his family. He quickly decided to get out of France, but instead of searching for his family in England, he went to America to seek his fortune in the colonies developing there.

Augustus eventually settled in the British colony of New York, where there were Huguenot communities in New York City, New Rochelle, and New Paltz. Augustus chose to live in New York City. As American Huguenots commonly did in the early 18th century, he joined the Church of England, and raised his family as Anglicans.

In 1745, Augustus's son, Peter Jay, moved to a farm he owned at Rye, bringing his family, which included his newborn son, John. John Jay was raised as Anglican, and had part of his childhood education at the school of Pierre Stoupe, the French pastor of the Anglican church in nearby New Rochelle.

The story of the Jays' persecution in France had a powerful formative effect on John Jay, and undoubtedly influenced him in his eventual role as a Founding Father, given the strong feelings it gave him about governmental oppression. It also gave him a lifelong antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church, which he once condemned as having "dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder, and rebellion through every part of the world." The separation of Church and State was a radical concept in the late 18th century—that had never happened in the history of Western civilization. Jay felt strongly that the Church must not participate in the making of civil laws. He was particularly concerned that the Catholic Church would demand obedience from its members in the American government in order to gain political power for itself. Out of this concern, during the New York State Constitutional deliberations of 1776-1777, Jay advocated barring Catholics from State citizenship and government service unless they pledged to "abjure and renounce all allegiance and subjection to all and every foreign king, prince, potentate, and state in all matters, ecclesiastical as well as civil." Jay's proposed requirement passed the convention.

John Jay's religious beliefs ran deep. He believed that a person's spiritual life happened primarily between the individual and God, and not through the intercession of religious officials.

Jay was devoted to the Bible, and believed literally in its words. This once brought him into an uncomfortable situation with his good friend and fellow Founding Father, Benjamin Franklin. During their time in Paris, they, along with John Adams, were negotiating the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution. Jay and his wife Sarah lived for a while with Franklin at a house at Passy. Franklin, as we all know, was a character. He usually wore Quaker dress in Paris, even though he was not a Quaker. Franklin was a shrewd manipulator of his public image, and he wore Quaker dress in order to stand out and look recognizably American to the French, playing the role of a celebrity. In fact, Franklin was a Deist who believed that God was not much involved in worldly matters. Franklin had considerable skepticism about many religious ideas. After his invention of the lightning rod, he had been widely attacked by ministers and priests. It was commonly believed in the 18th century that lightning was a punishment sent from God, rather like Zeus hurling thunderbolts, and some clerics argued that Franklin's invention was subverting divine punishment. Franklin dismissed this as nonsense—why would God punish a tree by hitting it with lightning?—but the clerical reaction reinforced his conviction that many religious ideas were foolish. At one social gathering, Franklin was joking about some of the Scriptures, a situation Jay found so unbearable that he asked Franklin to give an impromptu concert on his glass harmonica, even though Jay hated the instrument's sound—anything to get Franklin to stop ridiculing the Bible. At another gathering, a visitor to the house at Passy laughed at the idea of Jesus' divinity. Jay's reaction was to say nothing, get up from his chair, and walk away.

The American Revolution broke organizational ties between the United States and Britain, and that raised the question of how American members of the Church of England, like Jay, should relate to the Church in England. In other words, should American Anglican bishops

be under the authority of the British church? In 1786, Jay was named a delegate to a national Episcopal convention in Philadelphia, and he drafted a letter to the English bishops saying, "we have neither departed, nor propose to depart from the doctrines of your church," and that the American Episcopalians were "anxious to complete our Episcopal system, by means of the Church of England." Jay supported the nomination of Samuel Provoost, who was rector of Trinity Church in New York, as well as his personal friend, as Bishop of New York. Provoost was consecrated in England in 1787.

After Jay's retirement from politics in 1801, and his move to his Bedford farm, his absorption in religious matters increased, particularly after the death of his beloved wife Sarah in May 1802. Sarah had been the light of his life, and it would be a good idea at this point to give an idea of Jay's personality, and how that changed after she died. John had been born the eighth of ten children. He had four older siblings with significant disabilities: a brother who was apparently mentally retarded, a sister who was emotionally unstable, and another brother and sister who had been blinded by smallpox. It must have been hard for him to get all the attention he might have wished for as a child, and he developed considerable self-sufficiency. As a teenager, he seems to have been prone to excitability. This tendency led him, at an early age, to develop a near-obsession with self-control, which he mastered successfully. By the time he met Sarah, he was a rising lawyer in his late twenties, and she was a beautiful, intelligent, and vivacious teenager; he was eleven years older than she. As opposites, they complemented each other. John was the serious one, and Sarah lightened him up. After she died in 1802, the severe side of Jay's nature took a greater hold on him. Always certain that he and his wife would be reunited in the hereafter, he gave himself more and more to Biblical study. This became so well known that Jay's friend John Adams, himself hardly a *bon vivant*, eventually wrote to Thomas Jefferson that he would not wish to see his son "retire like a Jay to study prophecies to the end of his life."

Jay's children took after him in their religious devotion. When his younger son William reached the age of fourteen—a typical age for going to college in 1803—Jay sent him to Yale, instead of to Columbia, where John and William's elder son Peter Augustus had matriculated. The reason for this was religious: Yale was headed at this time by Rev. Timothy Dwight, a strong opponent of Deism and a staunch defender of religious orthodoxy. Dwight was also at one time the head of the Federalist political party in Connecticut; Jay was a Federalist, and he probably knew Dwight through this connection. Jay thought so much of Dwight that he wrote him to ask if William might be accepted into Dwight's household during his years at Yale. Dwight replied that this wouldn't work because of his frequent travels, but he arranged for William to live in the home of one of Yale's senior tutors. Life at Yale then included daily prayers in the school chapel, a counter perhaps, to the high-spirited pranks many of the students engaged in, as you'd expect at most any protracted gathering of teenagers.

William became at least as religious as his father, if not even more so. He became a vestryman at St. Matthew's Church in Bedford in 1811. In 1812, he married Augusta McVickar,

whose mother, Anna Moore McVickar, was a first cousin of Benjamin Moore, who later succeeded Samuel Provoost as the Episcopal Bishop of New York. The Moore/McVickar family and the Jays had known each other for some time; five years earlier, Benjamin Moore performed the marriage of William's brother, Peter Augustus, to Mary Rutherford Clarkson. The McVickar family included a number of clerics. Augusta's elder brother was John McVickar, who became a prominent Episcopal clergyman and a well-known professor of moral philosophy at Columbia College.

William was as devoted to the Bible as his father was. In 1815, the Westchester County Bible Society elected John Jay as its president, and William as its secretary. In 1816, William helped to found the American Bible Society. His father was named one of its twenty-three vice-presidents, and William was elected a lifetime director. The American Bible Society was founded to distribute the Bible without sectarian interpretation or association, or as the organization's constitution described it, "to encourage a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment." William remained active with the Bible Society for most of the rest of his life. In 1821, he saw his father elected the organization's president. Poor health kept the now elderly John Jay from attending any of its meetings, but each year he wrote a sermon to be delivered at the Bible Society's annual meeting. John Jay remained the organization's president until 1827.

The Jay household at Bedford, in this period, included John Jay, William Jay and his wife and children, and two of William's sisters, Nancy Jay, who had never married, and frequent visits by Maria Jay Banyer, by then a widow. A bell was rung every morning before breakfast and every evening at 9:00, just before John Jay's bedtime, to call the household to prayer. Dr. A. H. Stevens, many years later, recalled witnessing one of these prayer gatherings during a visit to the house in 1816:

"I recall the scene in the family parlor, the venerable Patriarch and his children, and the household within his gates, uniting in thanksgiving, confession and prayer. Sir, it was more like Heaven upon earth than anything I ever witnessed or conceived. It was worth more than all the sermons I ever listened to."

Of Jay's five children, all but one lived with him at Bedford for significant lengths of time. John Jay's eldest son, Peter Augustus, was a grown man by the time his father moved there, and he did not accompany him. Peter Augustus did reside at Bedford for a short while when recovering from a health ailment. Like the rest of the family, he was devout. Over the course of his life, Peter Augustus Jay served as a vestryman at St. Matthew's Church in Bedford, at Trinity Church and at the Church of the Ascension in New York City, was a trustee of the General Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and Director of the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, an organization devoted to converting Jews to

Christianity. On his deathbed, Peter Augustus's last words were: "My children, read the Bible and believe it," a statement his children had engraved on his tombstone.

Maria Jay Banyer, John Jay's eldest daughter, had much tragedy in her life, which she bore through her religious convictions. She was the only one of John Jay's daughters to marry. Her husband, Goldsborough Banyer, was from a good family in Albany. The couple lived with his father, who was blind. They had a son and a daughter. Goldsborough sickened and died in 1806, when he was only 31 years old. Their son died in his first year of life. In 1808, their daughter died, leaving Maria a childless widow at the young age of 26. Her sense of duty to her father-in-law kept her with him, however, and she lived with and cared for him until his own death, late in 1815, largely sacrificing her chances for starting another family. It was evidently Maria who commissioned the silver communion set used for Sunday services at St. Matthew's Church, since the set was made in Albany. The donation was made in her name, and in that of her sister Ann, who was familiarly called Nancy.

As mentioned earlier, Nancy Jay never married. After Sarah Jay's death, Nancy took over the role of female head of the household, and looked after her father until his death in 1829. Nancy once said, "if all were equally blessed with myself in such tender and indulgent parents, they would look for happiness at home, and not seek for it in the world, where they can never find it." She appears not to have been intent on finding a husband. Nancy venerated her father for his religious devotion, saying,

"In him we see verified many of the promises of scripture to those who love & fear God. Surely the "end of this man *is* peace." & it seems to us all that he enjoys more & more of that blessing--& to see his children choosing for themselves the same path & leading their children to do the same, is a happiness *he does feel*, but none can describe."

On another occasion, she wrote that "his continued peace of mind and habitual trust in an overruling Providence...more strongly recommends the blessings of religion, than volumes written in its praise."

After John Jay's death in 1829, Nancy and Maria moved to New York City and lived together there. They died within eight days of each other in 1856, and a single memorial service was held for the both of them. A 134-page book eulogizing them titled, *A Christian Memorial of Two Sisters*, was published in 1858. It is mostly composed of extracts of letters between the two; here is a brief sample of a letter Maria wrote to Nancy in 1824, meditating on the comforts faith in God can provide in a time of grief:

"I wish my own dear, best of sisters could know how pleasant though mournful my thoughts have been since we parted. You are often called upon to sympathize in my trials. I would have you to "sympathize

in my consolations." The dying remembrance of our sainted friend humbled me to the dust, while it excited the liveliest gratitude to Him from whom this and every other blessing comes; but dear sister, how much more should I be humbled by a Saviour's love and unmerited mercy! His goodness seems continually passing before me, contrasted with my unworthiness. Oh, that I could praise Him with all my powers for His innumerable mercies! Our departed friend once observed that she had seen it remarked that the "Lord never withdraws a blessing from His servants without giving them a greater," and I sometimes hope that her death may be more blessed to me even than her life. Dearest of sisters, pray that it may; and oh, help me to praise Him that He spared you to comfort me in every sorrow, and to sustain my feeble spirit in every trial, under every infirmity."

The excerpt gives a clear idea of the women's religious character. This is very typical prose from an educated, religious woman during this period.

Nancy and Maria supported evangelical organizations, and at the end of their lives left significant bequests to the American Bible Society, the Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Fairfax County, Virginia, the Episcopal Church's Missionary Society for Seamen in New York, the Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, Bishop Boone's mission in China, Bishop Payne's mission in Africa, the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, and the Pastoral Aid Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York City, among other charities.

William Jay survived his sisters by two years. He always held strong views, and in his early activity with the American Bible Society, he clashed with John Henry Hobart, then the assistant Episcopal Bishop of New York. Hobart argued for the distribution of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer together, which William Jay strongly opposed. The two argued in print for years afterward. Like his father, William Jay was strongly low church.

William became one of America's leading abolitionists, and the foundation of his beliefs was his religious faith. In his words, the anti-slavery cause was "strictly a religious one, founded on the gospel of Jesus Christ." He always felt that the best means of ending slavery in America was through moral suasion, of persuading slave owners that slave ownership was "an abominable sin," and that it was their Christian duty to free their slaves. William felt particular anger at Southern clerics who defended the institution of slavery, claiming it was endorsed by the Bible. He called these ministers "cotton divines," convinced that their principles were degraded by the plantation owners' financial support of themselves and their churches.

William was also appalled by the pro-slavery influence and racism then to be found in the Episcopal Church. In 1840, the Reverend Peter Williams, Jr. died; he is believed to have been the only African-American minister in the New York diocese at that time. Rev. Williams, a strong advocate for the rights of African-Americans, had been barred from a seat in the Protestant Episcopal Conventions throughout his lifetime, but two bishops attended his funeral, encouraging William Jay to hope that the Church's hierarchy had had a change of heart on race. Around this same time, however, Alexander Crummell, also a black man, was seeking to enter the Episcopal ministry. He met all the qualifications for admission to the General Theological Seminary, yet was rejected without any reason being given for the rejection. William Jay took up his cause, and wrote a letter to a newspaper, the New York *American*, signing it "An Episcopalian." In his letter, he mentioned that some professors had agreed to give Crummell private instruction, but only on the condition that he be barred from the seminary. Bishop Benjamin Onderdonk held that "more evil than benefit would result, both to the church and to himself, from a formal application in his behalf for admission to the Seminary." William Jay and his son, John Jay II, both supported Crummell; he was finally admitted as the only African-American student at the Episcopal seminary in Boston, where he was ultimately ordained in 1842. He organized the Church of the Messiah in New York as a black congregation, which was accepted by the 1846 convention, although this happened over the opposition of the vestry and the rector of Trinity Church. Reverend Crummell eventually went to England, graduated Queen's College at Cambridge, and went on to Liberia, where he spent the next twenty years.

In 1843, the *Spirit of Missions*, the newspaper of the Domestic and Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church, published an editorial that argued that the abolition of slavery was forbidden by Christian prudence, and that emancipation would be injurious to both masters and slaves. The editorial went on to recommend that a mission school be supported by buying slaves and promising them their freedom if they would work four hours a day for fifteen years, after which they would be given freedom...and transported to Africa. The proposal also recommended that the church sell off slaves deemed to be lazy or disorderly. William Jay felt what he termed a "violent shock" at this proposal. As a delegate to the General Convention, he introduced a resolution disclaiming the proposal, and urging a pledge to avoid taking official positions that provoked extreme controversy, which this proposal had done. Some Episcopalians, especially in the South, favored the mission school proposal, while others like Jay were utterly outraged by it. Jay's resolution was hotly debated at the Convention, but was ultimately tabled and no decision was made one way or the other on the mission school.

Yet through all this, William Jay remained firmly committed to the Episcopal Church, which he labored to convince to reject pro-slavery influence. He wrote to his fellow Episcopalian and abolitionist, the Ohio Congressman Salmon P. Chase,

"Let us rather remain in our church, and there strive valiantly for the truth, giving our Bishops and clergy no peace while they side with the oppressor. Let us in our vestries, our conventions, our missionary

boards, our diocesan societies, everywhere and at all times as propriety will allow, proclaim the wrongs of the slave and the duties of the church, and let us attack caste whenever it dares to enter the sacred enclosure, and all who presume to protect it."

Turning to the next generation of the Jay family, John Jay II, like his father, was determined to end pro-slavery influence and racial prejudice in the Episcopal Church. Almost immediately after being admitted to the bar as a lawyer in 1839, he spent nine years advocating the cause of St. Philip's Church, Rev. Peter Williams' black Episcopal congregation in New York City, in their struggle to become accepted into the Protestant Episcopal Convention, which they eventually did. He wrote abolitionist pamphlets, including *The American Church and the American Slave Trade* and *The Church and the Rebellion*. His activism caused much controversy—he was once punched in a courtroom by the lawyer for a slave owner whose runaway slave Jay had defended. In 1862, John Jay II, having for a number of years represented St. Matthew's Church at the Diocesan Convention, was not elected as a delegate because the Vestry felt that he "has for several years misrepresented this Parish by introducing the Slavery question to the injury thereof." The following year, however, the Vestry relented and allowed Jay to represent them at the Convention.

Like his father, John Jay II remained devoted to the Episcopal Church for the remainder of his life. It is an odd thing that a church function ultimately led to his death. In 1890, he was run over by a horse-drawn cab near Grand Central Terminal in New York, on his way from an evening service of the Diocesan Convention, where he was, as he had long been, a delegate. His hip and spine were broken in the accident. He became invalid, and suffered a very long decline, dying almost four years later.

As all this makes clear, religion held a central place in the lives of the Jays for several generations of the family.

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