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## Jefferson the Skeptic

History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government.

—Thomas Jefferson

As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson secured himself a top place in the American pantheon despite personal principles that have been distasteful to Christians throughout our history. Defamed by the religious right of his day as the Virginia Voltaire, Jefferson, like Franklin, was a true Enlightenment *philosophe* in every sense of the word, a thorough skeptic who valued reason far above faith and subjected every religious tradition, including his own, to scientific scrutiny. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale University during Jefferson's presidency, called him "the *real Jacobin*, the very child of *modern illumination*, the foe of man, and the enemy of his country." This was no rant from the lunatic fringe but a common opinion of Jefferson among practicing Christians then and later.

He had earned their enmity for three reasons: first, for writing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, a radical and groundbreaking document that would eventually serve as the model for the legal principle of church/state separation that still obtains in America today; second, as the first and most influential American advocate of the French science and philosophy that was so widely perceived at that time as atheistic; and third, as the author of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a classic of eighteenth-century free-thinking. This 1784 document created an outrage among the religiously-minded that could sometimes reach hysterical levels. Consider one extract, which takes Locke's principles much further than Locke himself ever ventured to take them and whose language seems almost deliberately calculated to provoke the zealots of the time:

The error seems not sufficiently eradicated, that the operations of

the mind, as well as the acts of the body, are subject to the coercion of the laws. . . . The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg . . . reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. . . . They are the natural enemies of error, and of error only.

If Jefferson intended to stir things up he certainly succeeded, and this passage soon became notorious. The response of the Reverend William Linn, a Dutch Reformed minister from New York, was typical: “Let my neighbor once persuade himself that there is no God, and he will soon pick my pocket, and break not only my *leg* but my *neck*. If there be no God, there is no law.” Without having to agree with Linn that moral behavior or law and order depend on religion, we can understand why he, and so many of his kind, were offended. For those who believe that there is one true God and only one and that everyone who fails to worship him will be damned, such an apparent carelessness for the souls of others would seem not only flippant but downright cruel. A conclusion that many inevitably drew was that Jefferson was an atheist, although he did not define himself as one, at least not in writing. But it is safe to say that he was definitely not a Christian; for while Jefferson professed to revere Jesus Christ as a philosopher and moralist, he displayed nothing but contempt for the Christian religion as it had been practiced and preached for nearly two millennia.

What are the self-selected Moral Majority, the legions of Americans who consider themselves “saved,” to make of a revered founding father who referred to Christianity as “our particular superstition” and to the God of the Old Testament as “a being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust”? Jefferson openly professed an unadulterated disgust for clergymen of all denominations: “In every country and in every age,” he wrote, “the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own.” It has been especially galling to believing Christians that this opinion was held by a man who was not only one of the key founding fathers but one of the great, acknowledged ornaments of American history and culture—“a fabulous polymath,” in the words of historian Bernard Bailyn: “politician, diplomat, archi-

tect, draftsman, connoisseur of painting, anthropologist, bibliophile, classicist, musician, lawyer, educator, oenologist, farm manager, agronomist, theologian (or rather, antitheologian), and amateur of almost every branch of science from astronomy to zoology, with special emphasis on paleontology.”

Not being able to ignore Jefferson, the Christian right has decided deliberately to misinterpret his message. Anti-separationists deny that Jefferson’s term “wall of separation between Church and State” meant anything like what modern “liberals” mean by the phrase. But if we read the whole passage from which this phrase was extracted, it really seems that he did:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building *a wall of separation between Church and State* [italics mine].

—from his letter to the Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, 1 January 1802

Context is everything. Another famous phrase taken out of its proper context is the noble sentiment quoted on the wall of the Jefferson memorial: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Christian apologists disingenuously ask how a godless man could have said any such thing, and Newt Gingrich has even included this engraved quotation in his Christian tour of the District of Columbia. But again, the context tells us more than such zealots would like the gullible citizen to know: this quotation was actually taken from a characteristically Jeffersonian explosion against priests and clergymen. Mocking the clergy as “the *genus irritabile vatum*” [irritable tribe of priests], he complained during his 1800 presidential campaign that they had all entertained

a very favorite hope of obtaining an establishment of a particular form of Christianity through the United States; and as every sect believes its own form the true one, every one perhaps hoped for his own. . . . The returning good sense of our own country threatens abortion to their hopes, and they believe that any portion of power confided to me, will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And

they believe rightly: for *I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man* [italics mine]. But this is all they have to fear from me: and enough too in their position.

In other words, the tyranny Jefferson struck out against was not that of political tyrants but of religious ones, not of kings but of ambitious clergymen jockeying for power and emoluments.

But what, Christians say, about the famous phrases of the Declaration of Independence: “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God,” “They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence”? It should be remembered, first of all, that “Nature and Nature’s God” was a standard formula employed not by conventional Christians but by Enlightenment deists: Nature’s God was *not* the God of the Old Testament, whom Jefferson considered “a being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust.” As for “a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,” this phrase did not appear in Jefferson’s draft; it was added later by Congress. Occasional references to Christianity as a “benign religion,” as for example in the First Inaugural Address, appear to have been strictly *pro forma* examples of the pious hypocrisy politicians have practiced from time immemorial—for nothing the president ever wrote in private expressed a belief that institutionalized Christianity was benign. Quite the contrary, in fact.

Jefferson’s natural inclination towards skepticism and empiricism was enhanced by upbringing, circumstances, and travel. Like George Washington, he was a product of the easy-going and undemanding Anglicanism practiced by the Virginia planter elite; he served on the church vestry when called upon to do so and in fact never officially abandoned the Episcopal Church, though in later life he tended to identify himself as a Unitarian. But his church affiliation was strictly a formality—certainly a necessary one if he planned to continue in public life. As a youth he had read the writings of the deists along with refutations of them by various Anglican divines, and like Benjamin Franklin before him he quickly found himself far more in sympathy with the mild deist point of view than that of its doctrinaire opponents.

Jefferson’s youthful perusal of the English deists and liberal

philosophers broadened his provincial American outlook; later, his five years' residence in France as American Minister would broaden it still further. In Paris he frequented the salons of the *philosophes* and avidly participated in the intellectual debates of the time. He shared the belief of the *Encyclopédistes* that the world was a comprehensible place and that the application of reason—which Jefferson asserted was “the only oracle given you by heaven”—could not fail, in the long run, to explain its mysteries. He wholeheartedly agreed with his contemporary Denis Diderot that “religion retreats as philosophy advances,” and with the Marquis de Condorcet that Christianity “feared that spirit of investigation and doubt, that confidence in one’s own reason, which is the scourge of all religious beliefs.” His stated heroes were the stars of the Enlightenment firmament, and he commissioned the painter John Trumbull to paint for him likenesses of Bacon, Locke, and Newton, in his opinion “the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those super-structures which have been raised in the Physical and Moral Sciences.” To name these three as the greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, is an implicit criticism of great men of faith up to and including Jesus himself.

Jefferson followed the Whig philosopher and deist Bolingbroke in maintaining that religion, like everything else in life, should be subjected to the test of reason—a tenet in direct opposition to the prevailing Calvinist emphasis on faith for its own sake. A famous letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, in which Jefferson offers the young man the benefit of his advice and experience, gives a pretty fair summary of his ideas on this subject.

Religion. Your reason is now mature enough to examine this object. . . . [S]hake off all the fears, and servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first, the religion of your own country. Read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The facts which are within the ordinary course of nature, you will believe on the authority of the writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus. The testimony of the writer weighs in their

favor, in one scale, and their not being against the laws of nature, does not weigh against them. But those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from God. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change in the laws of nature, in the case he relates. For example, in the book of Joshua, we are told, the sun stood still several hours. Were we to read that fact in Livy or Tacitus, we should class it with their showers of blood, speaking of statues, beasts, etc. But it is said, that the writer of that book was inspired. Examine, therefore, candidly, what evidence there is of his having been inspired. . . . You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law, which punished the first commission of that offence by whipping, and the second by exile, or death *in furcâ*. . . .

Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comforts and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief in his aid and love. In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudices on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision. I forgot to observe, when speaking of the New Testament, that you should read all the histories of Christ, as well as those whom a council of ecclesiastics have decided for us, to be pseudo-evangelists, as those they named Evangelists. Because these Pseudo-evangelists pretended to inspiration, as much as the others, and you are to judge their pretensions by your own reason, and not by the reason of those ecclesiastics.

This fascinating letter, a beautiful relic of Enlightenment empiricism, shows not only Jefferson's reverence for reason but his distrust—no, his downright distaste—for revelation, as he

enjoins Carr to examine the Evangelists' claims to having been inspired. Jefferson's private opinions on the Revelation of St. John, expressed in a letter to Alexander Smyth, are characteristic, and worth quoting.

It is between 50. and 60. years since I read it, and I then considered it as merely the ravings of a Maniac, no more worthy, nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams. . . . I cannot so far respect them as to consider them as an allegorical narrative of events, past or subsequent. There is not enough coherence in them to countenance any suite of rational ideas. . . . What has no meaning admits no explanation. And pardon me if I say, with the candor of friendship, that I think your time too valuable, and your understanding of too high an order, to be wasted on these paralogsms. You will perceive, I hope, also that I do not consider them as revelations of the supreme being, whom I would not so far blaspheme as to impute to him a pretension of revelation, couched at the same time in terms which, he would know, were never to be understood by those to whom they were addressed.

The final sentence is in classic deist idiom, with its reference to a benign "supreme being" who could not possibly have any wish needlessly to mystify his creatures.

Jefferson's personal creed, as he described in confidence to trustworthy friends such as John Adams, Benjamin Waterhouse, Dr. Joseph Priestley, and William Short, was a simple one. He believed, in the deist manner, in one God, a benign creator whose only revelation to man is made through Nature and Reason. He believed, or wished to believe (sometimes he didn't seem too sure) in an afterlife. So far as Christian dogma goes, these two propositions are all that he believed, and he listed under the category "artificial systems, invented by ultra-Christian sects," all the following doctrines: "The immaculate conception of Jesus, His deification, the creation of the world by Him, His miraculous powers, His resurrection and visible ascension, His corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, orders or Hierarchy, etc." "The day will come," he asserted (over-optimistically, as usual), "when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter." He was particularly scathing on the concept of the Trinity, scoffing at "the

hocus-pocus phantasm of a God like another Cerberus, with one body and three heads, [which] had its birth and growth in the blood of thousands and thousands of martyrs. . . . In fact, the Athanasian paradox that one is three, and three but one, is so incomprehensible to the human mind, that no candid man can say he has any idea of it, and how can he believe what presents no idea?”

Jefferson could find no evidence whatever for Jesus’ divinity, and ascribed Jesus’ claim to being the son of God to an understandable state of mild delusion brought about by the overheated zealotry of his era.

That Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the son of god physically speaking I have been convinced by the writings of men more learned than myself in that lore. But that he might conscientiously believe himself inspired from above, is very possible. The whole religion of the Jews, inculcated on him from his infancy, was founded in the belief of divine inspiration. . . . Elevated by the enthusiasm of a warm and pure heart, conscious of the high strains of an eloquence which had not been taught him, he might readily mistake the corruscations of his own fine genius for inspirations of an higher order. This belief carried therefore no more personal imputation, than the belief of Socrates, that himself was under the care and admonitions of a guardian daemon. And how many of our wisest men still believe in the reality of these inspirations while perfectly sane on all other subjects.

The use of the word “sane” in the final sentence says a great deal.

Jefferson considered, or claimed to consider, the moral system taught by Jesus “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man,” but believed that it had been distorted out of all recognition by a series of corrupters, most notably the four Evangelists, St. Paul, and John Calvin. This was a common opinion among deists, freethinkers, and theological liberals of the time. It was shared by Adams and, famously, by Priestley, whose influential books *The Corruptions of Christianity* and *Early Opinions of Jesus* had been enthusiastically read and hailed by Jefferson. The pure and simple philosophy of Jesus was comprehensible to any child, Jefferson said, but “the metaphysical abstractions of Athanasius, and the maniac ravings of Calvin, tintured plentifully with the foggy dreams of Plato, have so loaded it with absurdities and incomprehensibilities, as to drive into infidelity men who had not the time, patience, or

opportunity to strip it of its [*sic*] meretricious trappings, and to see it in all its native simplicity and purity.”

In the draft of an 1809 letter to James Fishback, which he felt free to send only after excising this provocative material, Jefferson laid out his opinions in a rational and dispassionate tone.

Every religion consists of moral precepts, and of dogmas. In the first they all agree. All forbid us to murder, steal, plunder, bear false witness &c. and these are the articles necessary for the preservation of order, justice, and happiness in society. In their particular dogmas all differ; no two professing the same. These respect vestments, ceremonies, physical opinions, and metaphysical speculations, totally unconnected with morality, and unimportant to the legitimate objects of society. Yet these are the questions on which have hung the bitter schisms of Nazarenes, Socinians, Arians, Athanasians in former times, and now of Trinitarians, Unitarians, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers &c. Among the Mahometans we are told that thousands fell victims to the dispute whether the first or second toe of Mahomet was longest; and what blood, how many human lives have the words ‘this do in remembrance of me’ cost the Christian world! We all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus; but we schismatize and lose ourselves in subtleties about his nature, his conception maculate or immaculate, whether he was a god or not a god, whether his votaries are to be initiated by simple aspersion, by immersion, or without water; whether his priests must be robed in white, in black, or not robed at all; whether we are to use our own reason, or the reason of others, in the opinions we form, or as to the evidence we are to believe. It is on questions of this, and still less importance, that such oceans of human blood have been spilt, and whole regions of the earth have been desolated by wars and persecutions, in which human ingenuity has been exhausted in inventing new tortures for their brethren. It is time then to become sensible how insoluble these questions are by minds like ours, how unimportant, and how mischievous; and to consign them to the sleep of death, never to be awakened from it. . . . We see good men in all religions, and as many in one as another. It is then a matter of principle with me to avoid disturbing the tranquility of others by the expression of any opinion on the [unimportant points] innocent questions on which we schismatize, and think it enough to hold fast to those moral precepts which are of the essence of Christianity, and of all other religions.

“Unimportant points” in the last sentence was softened into “innocent questions,” but it is clear by Jefferson’s dismissive tone here and elsewhere that he did find such points entirely unimportant, if not downright ridiculous.

Jefferson was blistering in his attack on many of the eminent figures of the Christian faith in their role as “corrupters.” “Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the great Corypheus, and first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus,” he asserted. Not far behind Paul were the Evangelists, ignorant and superstitious men who distorted their supposed Messiah’s message. “If we could believe that he [Jesus] really countenanced the follies, the falsehoods, and the charlatanism which his biographers [Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John] father on him, and admit the misconstructions, interpolations, and theorizations of the fathers of the early, and the fanatics of the latter ages, the conclusion would be irresistible by every sound mind that he was an impostor.”

In a series of private reflections to Adams, Jefferson upheld the opinion of the philosopher William Enfield that the Jewish moral philosophy of Jesus’s era had reached a “low state” of “wretched depravity,” and that Jesus saw himself as essentially an agent of moral reform. But “In extracting the pure principles which he taught,” Jefferson reiterates,

we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to them. We must dismiss the Platonists and Plotinists, the Stagyrtes and Gamalielites, the Eclectics the Gnostics and Scholastics, their essences and emanations, their Logos and Demi-urgos, Aeons and Daemons male and female, with a long train of Etc. Etc. Etc. or, shall I say at once, of Nonsense.

The solution was to separate the *sayings* of Jesus, at least those that seem in accordance with what we can glean of his character, from the miraculous *doings* ascribed to him by the apostles. This Jefferson did for himself, literally taking a razor to the New Testament and excising everything which seemed to him dubious.

I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging, the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an 8vo. [octavo] of 46. pages of pure and unsophisticated doctrines, such as were professed and acted upon by the *unlettered* apostles, the Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup>. century.

Indeed he had done it twice: first in 1804, creating a document he called “The Philosophy of Jesus,” and then again, far more

extensively, in 1820. This final work, “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels,” remained unpublished until 1903, when it was printed by the U.S. Congress for perusal by its members, and since that time it has enjoyed considerable popularity among agnostics and freethinkers. Needless to say, Jefferson himself was cagey about these activities of his, only confiding in trusted friends like Adams, Priestley, and Rush. It was his lifelong policy, reinforced by bitter experience in the political arena, to keep his unorthodox religious notions to himself.

Jefferson wrote of Priestley: “I have read his Corruptions of Christianity, and Early opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them, and on [Conyers] Middleton’s writings, especially his letters from Rome, and to Waterland, as the basis of my own faith.” Priestley, as we have seen, espoused a simple system of ethics as preached by Jesus and denounced subsequent corruptions; Middleton (1683–1750), an English divine, spoke out against all Biblical miracles and mysteries. What Jefferson called his “faith,” then, was indistinguishable from what most of us would define as ethics, informed by reason. Faith for faith’s sake, the leap of faith which has been so important in Christian thought, meant nothing to him: he himself defined belief, religious and otherwise, as “the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.” Much, far too much, of Christian dogma he considered the very opposite of intelligible.

Jefferson’s lifelong hatred of the clergy applied equally to every sect and creed and verged on the paranoiac. He seemed to see every single Christian priest and minister throughout history as having been involved in some vast right-wing conspiracy. “The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ levelled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw, in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might, from it’s indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power and pre-eminence,” he claimed. The exploitation of mysticism and magic, he assured his friends, “constitutes the power and the profits of the priests. Sweep away their gossamer fabrics of factitious religion, and they would catch no more flies.” He insisted that “the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus” were able to flourish only by obscuring simple truth with mumbo-jumbo: if their nonsensical

doctrines could be understood, "it would not answer their purpose. Their security is in their faculty of shedding darkness, like the scuttle-fish, thro' the element in which they move, and making it impenetrable to the eye of a pursuing enemy."

As a democrat with distinctly radical, Jacobin leanings (he openly supported the extremists during the French Revolution), Jefferson automatically disapproved of the priesthood as a hierarchical and tradition-bound institution. As an amateur scientist and Enlightenment intellectual, he despised its resistance to science and reason. Priests, he wrote, "dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of day-light." This cry, incidentally, would be echoed by H. L. Mencken more than a century later: "every priest who really understands the nature of his business is well aware that science is its natural and implacable enemy." Mencken was writing within the context of the 1925 Scopes trial which pitted Creationists against the expounders of evolution. We, in the twenty-first century, are replaying the old drama with our own concerns: not only evolution *versus* "intelligent design" this time, but stem-cell research and other bioethical issues. Can there be any doubt which side of the debate Jefferson would take?

All priests were bad, in Jefferson's view, but the Presbyterians were the worst of the lot.

The Presbyterian clergy are the loudest, the most intolerant of all sects; the most tyrannical and ambitious, ready at the word of the law-giver, if such a word could now be obtained, to put their torch to the pile, and to rekindle in this virgin hemisphere the flame in which their oracle, Calvin, consumed the poor Servetus, because he could not subscribe to the proposition of Calvin, that magistrates have a right to exterminate all heretics to the Calvinistic creed! They pant to re-establish by law that holy inquisition which they can now only infuse into public opinion.

His native Virginia he believed to be a fairly tolerant state, but this was not true, he claimed, "in the districts where Presbyterianism prevails undividedly. Their ambition and tyranny would tolerate no rival if they had power. Systematical in grasping at an ascendancy over all other sects, they aim, like the Jesuits, at engrossing the education of the country, are hostile to every institution they do not direct, and jealous at seeing others begin to attend at all to that object." And he was overjoyed when in

1817 the diehard Calvinistic state of Connecticut elected as governor the liberal Oliver Wolcott, who would finally disestablish the powerful Congregational Church in that state, following the example Jefferson had set more than thirty years earlier with his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Connecticut, Jefferson said, had been resurrected to “light and liberality,” and he rejoiced that “this den of the priesthood is at length broken up, and that a protestant popedom is no longer to disgrace the American history and character.” Adams did not share his optimism on this subject and reminded his friend that the Calvinist denizens of New England and elsewhere would “whip and crop, pillory and roast” if they could. But in the event, ironically, New England soon did become theologically more liberal, while Jefferson’s tolerant Virginia and its neighboring Southern states would succumb to a neo-Calvinist fundamentalism that has proved to be, if not a Protestant popedom, then certainly what Jefferson—and Adams—would have considered a disgrace to the American history and character.

As with other Enlightenment gentlemen such as George Washington, Jefferson seems really to have been more concerned with philosophical than with religious ideals, in particular the principles of Stoicism and Epicureanism. “I too am an Epicurean,” he wrote to his friend William Short. “I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus, indeed, has given us what was good of the Stoics. . . .” An extremely telling missive of 1821 expresses Jefferson’s hope “that the human mind will some day get back to the freedom it enjoyed 2000 years ago. This country, which has given the world an example of physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation also.” To express the belief that intellectual freedom had reached a height during ancient times that it had never again equaled was an implicit attack on Christianity, the mental system that replaced classical philosophy: Edmund Gibbon’s ferociously anti-Christian *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written during Jefferson’s youth, was the most famous book expounding this theory, and nothing in Jefferson’s voluminous writings would lead one to think that his own views diverged in any way from Gibbon’s.

Believing, as he did, that Reason and Nature are the only

revelation we have been given, it is perhaps inevitable that Jefferson should have regarded the moral sense as natural, springing not from the external laws imposed by religion—the Ten Commandments, the Torah, or any other system—but from each human being’s own inner sense of what is *naturally* right and just. The moral sense, he wrote, was “instinct and innate.”

[N]ature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses. . . . It is true that they are not planted in every man, because there is no rule without exceptions; but it is false reasoning which converts exceptions into the general rule. Some men were born without the organs of sight, or of hearing, or without hands. Yet it would be wrong to say that man is born without those faculties, and sight, hearing, and hands may with truth enter into the general definition of man.

Jefferson insisted that this moral code existed *independently* of religious beliefs. “If we did a good act merely from the love of God and a belief that it is pleasing to him,” he asked, “whence arises the morality of the Atheist? It is idle to say, as some do, that no such being exists.”

Jefferson’s moral and political philosophy as outlined above shaped his career, and in the process did much to shape the new nation he did so much to bring into the world. The tone he set, the political tenor, cannot be overestimated, and in no department was this more true than in the separation of Church and State, a radical and unprecedented proposition at the time of the nation’s founding.

The concept of religious freedom, and the difference between such freedom and the mere toleration advocated by Locke, was a lifelong obsession of Jefferson’s. His first drafts of the Virginia Constitution, written during the early months of 1776, specify that “All persons shall have full and free liberty of religious opinion; nor shall any be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious institution.” Later that year he perused the political writings of Locke and Shaftesbury in an attempt to apply their ideas, so far as it was possible, to the American scene. His private notes on the subject are quite revealing. Here are some selections:

Our Saviour chose not to propagate his religion by temporal

pun[ish]m[en]ts or civil incapacitations, if he had it was in his almighty power. But he chose extend it by it's influence on reason, thereby shewing to others how [they] should proceed.

The life & essence of religion consists in the internal persuasion of belief of the mind. External forms [of wor]ship, when against our belief, are hypocrisy [and im]piety.

If any man err from the right way, it is his own misfortune, no injury to thee, nor therefore art thou to punish him in the things of this life because thou supposest he will be miserable in that which is to come. On the contrary acc[or]d[in]g to the spirit of the gospel, charity, bounty, liberality is due to him.

No man complains of his neighbor for ill management of his affairs, for an error in sowing his land, or marrying his daughter, for consuming his substance in taverns, pulling down, build &c. In all these he has his liberty: but if he do not frequent the church, or there conform to ceremonies, there is an immediate uproar.

Locke denies toleration to those who entertain op[inio]ns contrary to those moral rules necessary for the preservation of society. . . . *But where he stopped short, we may go on* [italics mine].

If magistracy should vouchsafe to interpose thus in other sciences we should [have] as bad logic, mathematics & philosophy as we have divinity in countries where the law settles orthodoxy.

“Where he [Locke] stopped short, we may go on”: Jefferson meant that where Locke endorsed only toleration—that is, toleration for dissenters from an established church—the new United States should go further and endorse full religious freedom with no established church. Work that Jefferson would do later that year as a delegate to the Continental Congress included writing the rough draft of the Resolutions for Disestablishing the Church of England and for Repealing Laws Interfering with Freedom or Worship and a draft of a Bill Exempting Dissenters from Contributing to the Support of the Church.

Jefferson served as governor of Virginia from 1779 to 1781. The Anglican Church had been disestablished there during the Revolution, but full religious liberty had not been achieved, and this disagreeable fact remained a thorn in Jefferson's side. He derided the “religious slavery, under which a people have been willing to remain, who have lavished their lives and fortunes for the establishment of their civil freedom.” *Notes on the State of*

*Virginia*, which he wrote in 1781–2, contains passionate diatribes on this subject, among which the most famous is the following passage:

Reason and experiment have been indulged, and error has fled before them. It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself. Subject opinion to coercion: whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men; men governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face and stature. Introduce the bed of Procrustes then, and as there is danger that the large men may beat the small, make us all of a size, by lopping the former and stretching the latter. Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a Censor morum over each other. Is uniformity attainable? Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity.

What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools, the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth. Let us reflect that it is inhabited by a thousand different systems of religion. That ours is but one of that thousand. That if there be but one right, and ours that one, we should wish to see the 999 wandering sects gathered into the fold of truth. But against such a majority we cannot effect this by force.

Could there be more potent evidence that Jefferson was what our own contemporaries would call a religious relativist and a liberal humanist *par excellence*? *Notes on the State of Virginia* created a sensation in the salons of Paris when it was published there in 1785, raising its author's already high reputation in those circles.

Despite the fact that there was no established church in Virginia, a number of its prominent men, led by Patrick Henry, believed that citizens of the state should pay a tax to support all churches there. James Madison spearheaded the resistance to Henry's proposed Bill for a Religious Assessment, and Jefferson egged him on from France, where he was serving as American Minister. Then, in 1786, Madison steered through the Virginia legislature the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which Jefferson had composed nearly a decade before. This document, still included in the Virginia constitution, would become the basis for the Religious Clauses in the Bill of Rights three years later. Written in the same ringing prose that etched the Declaration of

Independence on the nation's collective memory, it deserves to be quoted in full. (The italics in paragraphs One and Three are mine.)

I. WHEREAS Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious presumptions of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, hath established and maintainted false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor, whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics and geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has a natural right; that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of wor[l]dly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and confirm to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment; and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out

into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that *truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.*

II. *Be it enacted by the General Assembly,* That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

III. And though we well know that this assembly elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet *we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind,* and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation such act will be an infringement of natural right.

A note about “the Holy author of our religion,” in Paragraph One: some of the legislators proposed that the name “Jesus Christ” be inserted before this phrase. This insertion, Jefferson recounted in his biography with considerable satisfaction, “was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.” Jefferson was unusual, in his time as in our own, in specifying his respect for the rights of the “infidel.”

The author of this document was understandably proud—so much so, that he requested that this achievement be etched on his tombstone, along with two others: his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and his founding of the University of Virginia. When the *Statute* was printed in Europe, it was received, as Jefferson pointed out complacently, “with infinite approbation,” and was even inserted into the new *Encyclopédie*. “In fact it is comfortable,” he commented to Madison, “to see the standard of reason at length erected, after so many ages during which the human mind has been held in vassalage by kings,

priests, and nobles: and it is honorable for us to have produced the first legislature who has had the courage to declare that the reason of man may be trusted with the formation of his own opinions.”

Jefferson was absent in France during the Constitutional Convention, but he kept in close touch with the proceedings through his correspondence with Madison, the chief architect of the Constitution. Jefferson vigorously advocated a Bill of Rights, which not all the delegates were persuaded was necessary. He was also influential in spreading the ideals of the American Bill of Rights to France, for while there he helped the Marquis de Lafayette to draft a French charter of rights that would become the basis for the Declaration of Rights that Lafayette presented to the National Assembly at Versailles in July 1789.

Jefferson served as Secretary of State under Washington and Vice-President under Adams, during which time his reputation as an atheist and rank democrat grew apace. (“Oh Lord!” intoned a Connecticut minister in the midst of a prayer for the welfare of President-elect Adams: “Wilt Thou bestow upon the Vice President a double portion of Thy grace, for *Thou knowest he needs it.*”) Conversation at the Virginia Voltaire’s dinner table could shock even his friends. The portraitist John Trumbull, for example, here describes an evening at Jefferson’s home in 1793 during which Senator Giles of Virginia

proceeded so far at last, as to ridicule the character, conduct and doctrines of the divine founder of our religion—Jefferson, in the mean time, smiling and nodding approbation on Mr. Giles, while the rest of the company silently left me and my defense to our fate; until at length my friend, David Franks, (first cashier of the Bank of the United States,) took up the argument on my side. Thinking this a fair opportunity for evading further conversation on this subject, I turned to Mr. Jefferson and said, “Sir, this is a strange situation in which I find myself; in a country professing Christianity, and at a table with Christians, as I supposed, I find my religion and myself attacked with severe and almost irresistible wit and raillery, and not a person to aid in my defense, but my friend Mr. Franks, *who is himself a Jew.*” For a moment, this attempt to parry the discussion appeared to have some effect; but Giles soon returned to the attack, with new virulence, and burst out with—“It is all miserable delusion and priestcraft; I do not believe one word of all they say about a future state of existence, and retribution for actions done here. I do not believe one word of a Supreme Being who takes cognizance of the

paltry affairs of this world, and to whom we are responsible for what we do." I had never before heard, or seen in writing, such a broad and unqualified avowal of atheism.

During the presidential election of 1800, which pitted Jefferson against the incumbent Adams, religion became for the first time a major campaign issue, establishing a destructive and divisive precedent. The following item, which was placed in the *Gazette of the United States* several times a month during the campaign, crudely announced the Federalist party line:

THE GRAND QUESTION STATED

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At the present solemn and momentous epoch, the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart, is  
"Shall I continue in allegiance to

GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS  
PRESIDENT;

or impiously declare for  
Jefferson—and no god!!!"

Anticipating the machinations of political manipulators like Ralph Reed and Karl Rove, Alexander Hamilton cynically played on the religious sentiments and prejudices of the American electorate to blacken the opposing candidate's character. Jefferson's long history as a freethinker made him vulnerable as a candidate for national office, and Hamilton exploited this vulnerability by presenting Adams, the Federalist man, as especially pious. This dichotomy was as false as such political dichotomies usually are, for Adams could hardly have been described as an orthodox Christian, nor was Hamilton himself, at that time, any more devout than Jefferson. But appearance is everything in politics, and Jefferson was widely perceived, in the words of the New England jurist Theophilus Parsons, as the "great arch priest of Jacobinism and infidelity." In a Jefferson presidency, the *Connecticut Courant* editorialized, "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced."

But Jefferson turned out to be just as canny a politician as Hamilton. He managed to turn the negative campaigning of his opponents against them by representing them (as falsely as they

had characterized him) as reactionary proponents of an established church; specifically, he exploited the hatred and fear of Presbyterians among the rapidly growing ranks of Baptists, Methodists and other nonconforming sects, implying that the Federalists would seek to reverse the nation's long battle for religious freedom by establishing Presbyterianism.

This tactic might have been what won the election for Jefferson; at least, that was what Adams believed. As he wrote to Mercy Warren some years later, "With the Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, and Moravians, as well as the Dutch and German Lutherans and Calvinists, it had an immense effect, and turned them in such numbers as decided the election. They said, let us have an Atheist or Deist or any thing rather than an establishment of Presbyterianism." Tom Paine, observing the mood of the people in the months preceding the election, agreed with this judgment. "When I was in Connecticut . . .," he recalled, "I fell in company with some Baptists among whom were three ministers. The conversation turned on the election for President, and one of them who appeared to be a leading man said, 'They cry out against Mr. Jefferson because they say he is a Deist. Well, a Deist may be a good man, and if he think it right, it is right to him. For my own part,' said he, 'I had rather vote for a Deist than for a blue-skin Presbyterian.'" In other words, better a *laissez-faire* President with little or no religion than a pious President intent on promoting his own sect.

As President, Jefferson took the federal doctrine of church/state separation absolutely literally. He entirely refrained, for example, from proclaiming fasts and thanksgivings. Many objected. Jefferson laid out his considered reasons for this policy in his Second Inaugural Address, then later and more extensively in an 1808 letter to a clergyman friend, the Reverend Samuel Miller (the italics are mine):

I consider the government of the U.S. as interdicted by the constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises. . . . But it is only proposed that I should indirectly assume to the U.S. an authority over religious exercises which the Constitution has directly precluded them from. It must be meant too that this recommendation is to carry some authority, and to be sanctioned by some penalty on those who disregard it; not indeed of fine and imprisonment, but of some degree of proscrip-

tion perhaps in public opinion. And does the change in the nature of the penalty make the recommendation the less a law of conduct for those to whom it is directed? *I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct it's exercises, it's discipline, or it's doctrines; nor of the religious societies that the general government should be invested with the power of effecting any uniformity of time or matter among them.* Fasting & prayer are religious exercises. The enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, & the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the constitution has deposited it.

But Washington and Adams, critics pointed out, had proclaimed thanksgivings. Jefferson argued that this precedent should have no significance, and that the first two presidents' proclamations (which Jefferson gently implied were thoughtless mistakes) had probably been responsible for sanctioning the essentially illogical assumption that the federal government has *any right* to intervene in this area.

I am aware that the practice of my predecessors may be quoted. But I have ever believed that the example of state executives led to the assumption of that authority by the general government, without due examination, which would have discovered that what might be a right in a state government, was a violation of that right when assumed by another. Be this as it may, every one must act according to the dictates of his own reason, & mine tells me that *civil powers alone have been given to the President of the U.S. and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.*

During Jefferson's long retirement from public service, which lasted from 1809 until his death in 1826, his favorite project was the creation of the University of Virginia. The College of William and Mary, which he himself had attended and which had been Virginia's principal educational establishment since colonial times, he saw as retrograde, worn out, and philosophically nil: "just well enough endowed to draw out the miserable existence to which a miserable constitution has doomed it." As he described it in his autobiography,

The College of William and Mary was an establishment purely of the Church of England; the Visitors were required to be all of that Church; the Professors to subscribe to its thirty-nine articles; its

Students to learn its Catechism; and one of its fundamental objects was declared to be, to raise up Ministers for that church.

The new university, on the contrary, would be created on a plan “so broad and liberal and *modern*, as to be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other states to come and drink the cup of knowledge and fraternize with us.”

Jefferson took the primary role in establishing the curriculum of the new university: those interested in the subject might consult his letter to Peter Carr of 7 September 1814, in which he laid out his ideas for the curriculum in great detail. He had many guiding principles, but of these the most important was that the university should act as a philosophical reflection of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom; he opposed the establishment of a Chair of Divinity, explaining his reasons for doing so in a Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia:

In conformity with the principles of our Constitution, which places all sects of religion on an equal footing, with the jealousies of the different sects in guarding that equality from encroachment and surprise, and with the sentiments of the legislature in favor of freedom of religion, manifested on former occasions, we have proposed no professor of divinity; and the rather as the proofs of the being of a God, the creator, preserver, and supreme ruler of the universe, the author of all the relations of morality, and of the laws and obligations these infer, will be within the province of the professor of ethics. . . .

Religion, in other words, was to be treated in ethical rather than doctrinal terms.

Not that Jefferson meant to banish all religious expression from his Academical Village: rather, each denomination was allowed to take part on an exactly equal basis. Sectarian schools of divinity were invited to set up shop in the vicinity of the University so that their students might avail themselves of the educational offerings of this secular institution. Jefferson even attempted to extend this principle to Virginia’s public elementary schools, proposing in 1817 a School Act that would exclude ministers of the gospel from acting as school trustees and bar religious instruction specific to any one sect or denomination; but this Act was rejected by the Virginia legislature.

The Second Great Awakening, which had begun around 1799 and caused Jefferson so much trouble during his first presidential campaign, had gone into full force by the time he retired. By then he was relieved of the political necessity of paying any sort of lip service to religion and its ministers, and he occasionally let blast with the full force of his disgust. Confidential letters to friends, now published and available for anyone to read, can leave us in no doubt as to his real opinions.

These reverend leaders of the Hartford nation [Presbyterian clergy of New England] it seems then are now falling together about religion, of which they have not one real principle in their hearts. Like bawds, religion becomes to them a refuge from the despair of their loathsome vices. They seek in it only an oblivion of the disgrace with which they have loaded themselves, in their political ravings, and of their mortification at the ridiculous issue of their Hartford convention.

—letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, 13 October 1815

In our Richmond there is much fanaticism, but chiefly among the women. They have their nightly meetings and praying parties, where, attended by their priests, and sometimes by a hen-pecked husband, they pour forth the effusions of their love for Jesus, in terms as amatory and carnal, as their modesty would permit them to use to a mere earthly lover.

—letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper, 2 November 1822

You judge truly that I am not afraid of the priests. They have tried upon me all their various batteries, of pious whining, hypocritical canting, lying and slandering, without being able to give me one moment of pain. I have contemplated their order from the Magi of the East to the Saints of the West, and I have found no difference in character, but of more or less caution, in proportion to their information or ignorance of those on whom their interested duperies were to be plaid off. Their sway in New England is indeed formidable. No mind beyond mediocrity dares there to develop itself. . . .

They are now looking to the flesh pots of the South and aiming at foothold there by their missionary teachers. They have lately come forward boldly with their plan to establish “a qualified religious instructor over every thousand souls in the US.” And they seem to consider none as qualified but their own sect.

—letter to Horatio Gates Spafford, 10 January 1816

Jefferson did not even go along with the argument, so frequently put forward by modern proponents of a Christian

America, that our legal system is philosophically based on holy scripture. The principles of our constitution are largely derived from English Common Law, and during Jefferson's lifetime the great English jurist Sir William Blackstone had asserted that Common Law was based on Christianity. Jefferson devoted a good hunk of time during his retirement to refuting that claim through his own scholarly research. Common Law, he said, was originally a Saxon institution.

For we know that the common law is that system of law which was introduced by the Saxons on their settlement in England, and altered from time to time by proper legislative authority from that time to the date of Magna Charta. . . . This settlement took place about the middle of the fifth century. But Christianity was not introduced till the seventh century; the conversion of the first christian king of the Heptarchy having taken place about the year 598, and that of the last about 686. Here, then, was a space of two hundred years, during which the common law was in existence, and Christianity no part of it. . . . If, therefore, from the settlement of the Saxons to the introduction of Christianity among them, that system of religion could not be a part of the common law, because they were not yet Christians, and if, having their laws from that period to the close of the common law, we are all able to find among them no such act of adoption, we may safely affirm (though contradicted by all the judges and writers on earth) that Christianity neither is, nor ever was a part of the common law.

Biblical authority was later introduced, as he proved ingeniously, by a "pious fraud"—a mistranslation of the Old French *scripture* as "scripture" rather than simply "writing," which is the correct equivalent.

For modern anti-separationists to claim that Thomas Jefferson, of all people, was a good Christian who really didn't mean what we do by separation of Church and State, smacks of desperation—just how flimsy is their case if it cannot stand without the support of the Virginia Voltaire, the arch-Jacobin? There are, certainly, founding fathers who were devout Christians: John Jay and Benjamin Rush, for example. But no one who has seriously looked into the question could ever pretend to claim Thomas Jefferson as one of their number. Arm-in-arm with his friend James Madison, Jefferson in fact tried harder than any other founding father to remove religion definitively from the political life of the new nation.