

## Constitutional Corner - Jefferson's "bible"

There has been, over many years, a conscious effort to malign the character and religious belief of Thomas Jefferson -- oddly, much more than of any other Founder. Jefferson has been variously called "our first atheist President," and "a Deist;" neither claim holds up to even a superficial examination of Jefferson's life and beliefs. Why Jefferson has been singled out for such treatment is not completely understood, but it behooves anyone interested in the Founders, particularly anyone who quotes them, to be armed with facts instead of opinions and rumors.

If you study the history of Christianity at all you will note that the definition of being a "Christian" has changed many times since the first century A.D. The Ebionites, Docetists, Gnostics, and many other Christian sects believed they had laid hold of "the truth," yet their beliefs today are seen to lay outside the tenets of the faith. In England of the 1500s, who were the "true believers:" the Protestants being burned at the stake or the Catholics who lit the flame? When these groups later changed places, did the "truth" change with them?

Many a sermon this month focused on the virgin birth. Some today insist that if you do not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus you undermine the entire foundation of faith. Has this become the new litmus test of fellowship? In the end, only God knows the truth of a person's heart, and only God gets the final "vote" on our eternal destiny.

In one of his most famous statements on his personal beliefs, Jefferson (in 1803) called himself "a Christian, in the only sense in which he (Jesus) wished anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others, ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other."<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

Author (and Pastor) Mark Beliles of Charlottesville, Virginia has written the most comprehensive treatment of Jefferson's religious views. Entitled: "[\*Doubting Thomas? The Religious Life and Legacy of Thomas Jefferson\*](#)," the book shows that Jefferson's religious life went through five distinguishable phases. But if there is one transcendent characteristic of all five it would be Jefferson's never-wavering financial and personal support for orthodox Christian ministers and orthodox Christian churches throughout his entire life. We must ask, why would Jefferson support, financially, the propagation of views and doctrines with which he disagreed? Would we today?

Born 1743 in Shadwell, Virginia, Jefferson joined the vestry of the Fredericksville Parish Anglican Church at age 24. To become a vestryman he was required to affirm by oath that he subscribed to "the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England" -- doctrine which confirmed the

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<sup>1</sup> April 21, 1803 letter to Benjamin Rush.

divinity of Christ and other traditional tenets of the Christian faith. For the next twenty years, Jefferson's writings and actions reveal him to be completely orthodox but nevertheless insistent on an informed faith. He instructed his nephew Peter Carr to "Question with boldness even the existence of a God;... read the bible;...It is said that the writer of that book was inspired."

Beginning in 1788 we begin to see in Jefferson's writings that certain doctrines, such as the Trinity, are troubling him and have apparently done so for some time. That year, Jefferson excused himself from sponsoring a child in baptism due to "difficulty of reconciling the ideas of Unity and Trinity," a belief which Jefferson thought incumbent upon a sponsor. This second phase of Jefferson's religious life ends in 1802 with him sitting as our third President, having endured during the Presidential election of 1800, vehement opposition from New England pastors, none of whom had ever met him. Pastors who had met or corresponded with Jefferson and who knew his views first-hand came to his defense, but Jefferson never forgot nor excused those who had written false and libelous accusations, maligning someone they had never personally met.

In 1804, Jefferson composed the first of his two "bibles." They are commonly called "bibles" today although they had no pretension of being such and were clearly not intended to replace the Bible. As Jefferson described them they were intended as either a "digest" or an "abridgement" of the "life and morals of Jesus." Jefferson constrained himself to verses found in the four Gospels.

The previous year, President Jefferson had purchased the Louisiana territory from France, and this brought many new Indian tribes under the care of the United States. To help them understand the "author" of the Christian religion, Jefferson composed: *"The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted from the account of his life and doctrines as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke & John; being an abridgement of the New Testament for the use of the Indians unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions."* (emphasis added)

In an 1813 letter, Jefferson wrote that the book had captured "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man." This first abridgement has not survived in its entirety; how many copies of it were produced and to whom it was eventually distributed are unknown. But the book has been reliably recreated from a table of contents which did survive (a "Table of Texts") and other artifacts. You can buy a [modern copy](#) on Amazon, replete with historical analysis and supporting documentation.

The final phrase in Jefferson's subtitle, emphasized above, is important. How do we today explain miracles to a four-year old? Should we even try? Do any of us today really understand how God brought about a virgin birth? Biologically, what happened? Is it even understandable

by the human mind? It was not understandable to Jefferson's great mind, and that became, for him, a stumbling block. Jefferson could not accept what he could not explain. Yet he still believed in a transcendent God who took an interest in human affairs: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever."<sup>2</sup>

During the fourth phase of Jefferson's religious life, 1813-1820, we see him expressing a clear rejection of Trinitarianism, although only in private. Jefferson was very protective of his religious views, having seen first-hand how they could be used for political gain by those with agendas. Some of his private letters had even ended up in print, without his permission. Jefferson believed, with Unitarian Joseph Priestly, that true Christianity had been "corrupted" by "priests." He pined for the "restoration to the primitive simplicity of it's founder."

During this period, Jefferson came to his ultimate religious conclusion: "I am a sect of myself, as far as I know. [Jesus] has told us only that God is good and perfect, but has not defined Him. I am, therefore, of His theology, believing that we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition...No doctrines of His lead to schism."<sup>3</sup>

Despite all his "wrestling with faith," Jefferson completed, in 1819, a second compilation of "[The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth](#)" this time for his personal use; and this volume did survive in its entirety. Both of the abridgements begin with Luke 2:1-7. In the first, Jesus is left dying on the cross (John 19: 28-30), in the second, Jefferson places Jesus in the tomb (Matthew 27:60), but leaves him there. Can you explain the life and morals of Jesus and yet avoid mention of His virgin birth or resurrection? Jefferson thought so.

Both volumes contain several passages which reference the supernatural or miracles such healing and resurrection of the dead. Both volumes refer to heaven, angels, the devil and eternal life. But both volumes also ignore some miracles Jesus personally performed (such as turning water into wine).

During the last phase of his live, 1820 to his death in 1826, Jefferson identifies himself in a private letter as a Unitarian, joining his friend and erstwhile political rival John Adams in that distinction. Did Jefferson reject Christ? Not as Jefferson understood Him! I wonder how many attending Christian churches today hold views similar to those of Thomas Jefferson? Would we today ask Thomas Jefferson to worship somewhere else?

**Summary:** Thomas Jefferson was a complex individual, perhaps our most enigmatic President. Like any living, breathing, thinking human being, his views, on multiple subjects, changed over time as he was exposed to new information and exchanged ideas with others. To apply a single

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<sup>2</sup> From Notes on Virginia, 1781.

<sup>3</sup> June 25, 1819 letter to Ezra Stiles Ely.

label to the man is unfair and simplistic. What we can state with certainty is that Jefferson did not set out to “re-write the New Testament.” That statement is patently false. Neither did he write a Bible nor “take a Bible and cut out all the miracles.” What should be said instead, is that Thomas Jefferson compiled, twice in his life – once to promote moral Christianity among Indian tribes and once for his personal use -- volumes which captured a chronological life and the moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, including references to miraculous events and the transcendent. The books neither inferred nor overtly rejected Jesus’ divinity as we understand it today; they were intended to be, and became, guidebooks for a moral and virtuous life. Will we encounter Thomas Jefferson in heaven? We hope. God knows.

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