



Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson (April 13, 1743-July 4, 1826) is known the world over as the principal author, in 1776 at age 33, of the Declaration of Independence; as author of the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom instituting separation of church and state in Virginia, passed in 1786; and as third president of the United States, 1801-09. As president Jefferson commissioned the Lewis and Clark expedition, launched in 1803, to map the vast, unknown territory northwest of St. Louis; and he negotiated and persuaded Congress to fund the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, greatly increasing the size of the U.S. He also protected crucial trade interests of his young nation by making war with the Barbary States, 1801-05.

Jefferson held many other public offices. He was a delegate to the House of Burgesses in colonial Virginia, 1769-76; Governor of Virginia during the War for Independence, 1779-81; for five years U.S. Minister to France, 1785-89, where he observed events leading to the French Revolution; the first Secretary of State under George Washington, 1790-93; and Vice President under [John Adams](#), 1797-1801.

The range of Jefferson's genius—his interests, abilities and accomplishments—would be extraordinary in any age. He is famous for his garden, for the precise observations he made of his varied plants and for his inventions which included the dumb-waiter and a machine that duplicated handwriting. After his retirement from politics, he devoted much time and energy to founding the University of Virginia, opened to students in 1825. A capable architect, he designed his plantation home, Monticello, and the early buildings of the University of Virginia. Only one book of his authorship, *Notes on Virginia*, was published in his lifetime. Publication of his letters alone, however, not to mention his state papers, now fill many volumes. He was throughout his long life an avid student of many fields. Late in his life Congress purchased his library, at that time the largest in the country, making it the core collection of the new Library of Congress. Congress published posthumously, in 1904, his collation of extracts from the Gospels, now known as the "Jefferson Bible."

Jefferson's public life was not without turmoil, failure and scandal, nor was his private life without tragedy and trouble. His beloved wife died at a young age. Five of his six children died prematurely, four in infancy. In all his adult life he was never free from the burden of seriously threatening indebtedness.

The character of Jefferson's religion is one of the most interesting aspects of his intriguing life. Certain evangelicals, who were also his political opponents, tried very hard to make Jefferson's religion a factor in elections. They filled the press with scurrilous attacks on his "deistical" beliefs. He made it his steadfast policy never to respond to any of these attacks or, indeed, to make any public statement at all concerning his faith. Ironically, in spite of the attacks, evangelicals flocked to support Jefferson because they favored the end of tax support for established churches—which meant freedom for their independent churches—as passionately as did he. Today religious

conservatives portray Jefferson as a sympathetic figure, unaware of his religious beliefs, his understanding of religious freedom or his criticisms of evangelical religiosity.

These facts about Jefferson's religion are known. He was raised as an Anglican and always maintained some affiliation with the Anglican Church. He was also known to contribute financially, in fair proportion, to every denomination in his town. While a student at William and Mary College, he began to read the Scottish moral philosophers and other authors who had made themselves students of church history. These scholars opened the door for Jefferson's informed criticism of prevailing religious institutions and beliefs. But it was the world renowned English Unitarian minister and scientist, Joseph Priestley, who had the most profound impact on his thought. According to Priestley's *Corruptions of Christianity*, published in 1782, and many other of his books, the teachings of Jesus and his human character were obscured and obfuscated in the early Christian centuries. As the Church Fathers adapted Christianity to Mediterranean-primarily Greek-forms of thought, they contrived doctrines altogether foreign to Biblical thought, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Jefferson assumed that a thoroughly reformed Christian faith, true to Jesus' teaching, would be purged of all Greek influence and doctrinal absurdity.

Jefferson never joined a Unitarian church. He did attend Unitarian services while visiting with Joseph Priestley after his immigration to Pennsylvania and spoke highly of those services. He corresponded on religious matters with numerous Unitarians, among them Jared Sparks (Unitarian minister, historian and president of Harvard), Thomas Cooper, Benjamin Waterhouse and John Adams. He was perhaps most open concerning his own beliefs in his long exchange of letters with John Adams during their late years, 1812-26.

It is probably safe to say that Jefferson first acquired from Joseph Priestley features of his world view and faith which he found confirmed to his satisfaction by further thought and study for the rest of his life. These included a withering a scorn for Platonic and all forms of Neoplatonic metaphysics; a fierce loathing of all "priestcraft" whose practitioners he held guilty of deliberately perpetrating rank superstition for centuries, thus maintaining their own power; a serene conviction that Jesus' moral teaching was entirely compatible with natural law as it may be inferred from the sciences; and a unitarian view of Jesus. These features are all well attested in his voluminous private correspondence.

Jefferson's earliest writings on religion exhibit a natural theology, a heavy reliance on reason, and the belief that morality comes not from special revelation but from careful attention to the inward moral sense. In a letter to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson advised, "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god."

He considered Jesus the teacher of a sublime and flawless ethic. Writing in 1803 to the Universalist physician [Benjamin Rush](#), Jefferson wrote, "To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one 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."

Jefferson found the Unitarian understanding of Jesus compatible with his own. In 1822 he predicted that "there is not a young man now living in the US who will not die an Unitarian." Jefferson requested that a Unitarian minister be dispatched to his area of Virginia. "Missionaries from Cambridge [that is: Harvard Divinity School] would soon be greeted with more welcome, than from the tritheistical school of Andover." Jefferson's christology is apparent in these and similar letters, and also in one of his most famous writings, the "Jefferson Bible."

Of immense appeal is the image of President Jefferson, up late at night in his study at the White House, using a razor to cut out large segments of the four Gospels and pasting the parts he decided to keep onto the pages of a blank book, purchased to receive them. This original project of 1804, which he titled "The Philosophy of Jesus," he refined and greatly expanded in his later years. The final product, completed in 1820, he called the "Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," which was the version Congress published. Jefferson's "Life and Morals" argues no theology. It is simply his edited version of the Gospels. He literally cut out the virgin birth, miracle stories, claims to Jesus' divinity and the resurrection. Some scholars believe he first assembled his collage of Jesus' teachings for his own devotional use. A late reference to the "Indians" who could benefit from reading it, was likely directed at those public figures, often Christian ministers, who had viciously attacked his religious beliefs without in the least understanding them or—as Jefferson believed—Jesus.

Thomas Jefferson's genius is everywhere apparent in his thirst for and his comprehension of the best enlightened philosophy, history, science, political theory, agriculture and religion of his age. Tragically, he failed utterly to engage, in any substantively practical way whatsoever, the massive realities of American racial oppression and injustice. Jefferson's writings display deep reservations as well as moral anguish concerning Negro slavery; yet he never freed his own slaves. Much attention, in Jefferson's time and in ours, has focused on his alleged sexual relations with his mixed-race slave, Sally Hemings, the light skinned half-sister of his wife. There is now compelling DNA evidence that Jefferson was the father of at least one of Hemings' children. He did free two of Hemings' children in his will and Hemings was given her freedom shortly thereafter. But millions of African Americans have had to suffer many more decades of cruel economic slavery, even after legal slavery was ended in the 1860s, because of the common, absurd notion, which Thomas Jefferson shared and only mildly questioned, that the "dark" races were inferior to the "white." Moreover, Jefferson's presidential removal policies proved horribly destructive to Native Americans. They set the pattern for the Bill for Indian Removal, signed by President Jackson in 1830, whose cruel enforcement resulted in the Trail of Tears of 1838-39 and other atrocities. Jefferson's prophetic advancement of human liberty is deeply tainted by his shameful legacy in matters of race.

The Library of Congress holds the largest collection of Jefferson manuscripts. Also, the University of Virginia Special Collections Library has a sizable collection, the prize of which is Jefferson's architectural drawings. The exhaustive collection of Jefferson's writings, Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (1950-), has reached 27 volumes but has only covered Jefferson's writings up to 1793. Two other

multi-volume collections are notable: Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (1904-05) and Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (1903-04.) A single volume work, Merrill Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (1984) is a brilliant compilation that contains most of Jefferson's noteworthy texts. The definitive edition of the "Jefferson Bible" is *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*, Dickinson Adams, ed. (1983) which features an excellent introduction by Eugene Sheridan and a useful 100- page appendix of Jefferson's letters on religion. *The Jefferson Bible* (1989) contains commentaries by F. Forrester Church and Jaroslav Pelikan.

Jefferson wrote the beginning of an autobiography in 1821, covering the years 1743-90. Dumas Malone's six-volume *Jefferson and His Times* (1948- 81) is the classic Jefferson biography. Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (1997) is a masterpiece. Merrill Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). is also recommended. Fawn Brodie's personal and psychological portrait, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) is a popular and entertaining biography.

General studies on Jefferson and religion include Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God* (1996), Charles Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (1984), Eugene Sheridan, *Jefferson and Religion* (1998), and Paul Conkin, "The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson" in Peter Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (1993). Henry Wilder Foote's, *The Religion of Thomas Jefferson* (1947) is an interested study proclaiming Jefferson's Unitarianism. On Jefferson and religious freedom, see *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, Merrill Peterson and Robert Vaughan, eds. (1988). A classic work on Jefferson and natural philosophy is Daniel Boorstin's *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (1948.)

Henry Adams's 2 volume *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (1891, reprinted 1986) is the classic history of Jefferson's presidency. William Howard Adams, *Jefferson's Monticello* (1983) deserves special citation for its beauty. Merrill Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960) is a thoughtful, engaging text considering Jefferson's place in popular memory. The pace-setting work on Jefferson and slavery is John Chester Miller, *Wolf By the Ears* (1977). On the specific topic of Sally Hemings, consult Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997). An opposing viewpoint is expressed in Virginius Dabney, *The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal* (1981). Also consider Paul Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery" in Peter Onuf, ed., *Jeffersonian Legacies* (1993). On Jefferson's views and policies concerning Native Americans, see Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians* (1999).

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