

Excerpts from Wikipedia Article on ‘Jefferson and Religion’

Separation of church and state

Jefferson sought what he called a "wall of separation between Church and State," which he believed was a principle expressed by the First Amendment. This phrase has been cited several times by the Supreme Court in its interpretation of the Establishment Clause.^[24] In an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, he wrote:

“ *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.*^[25] ”

Regarding the choice of some governments to regulate religion and thought, Jefferson stated:

“ *The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.*^[26] ”

Deriving from this statement, Jefferson believed that the Government's relationship with the Church should be indifferent, religion being neither persecuted nor given any special status.

“ *If anything pass in a religious meeting seditiously and contrary to the public peace, let it be punished in the same manner and no otherwise as it had happened in a fair or market*^[27] ”

Though he did so as Governor of Virginia, during his Presidency Jefferson refused to issue proclamations calling for days of prayer and thanksgiving.

Jefferson, Jesus, and the Bible

Jefferson considered much of the New Testament of the Bible to be false. He described these as "so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture".^[28] He described the "roguery of others of His disciples",^[29] and called them a "band of dupes and impostors" describing Paul as the "first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus", and wrote of "palpable interpolations and falsifications".^[29] He also described the Book of Revelation to be "merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams".^[30]

From his careful study of the Bible, Jefferson concluded that Jesus never claimed to be God.^[31] While living in the White House, Jefferson began to piece together his own condensed version of the Gospels, omitting the virgin birth of Jesus, miracles attributed to Jesus, divinity and the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, primarily leaving only Jesus' moral philosophy, of which he approved. This compilation titled *The LIFE AND MORALS OF JESUS OF NAZARETH Extracted Textually from the Gospels Greek, Latin, French, and English* was published after his death and became known as the *Jefferson Bible*.^[6]

Jefferson, Priestley, Unitarianism, and Deism

Jefferson expressed general agreement with his friend Joseph Priestley's Unitarianism, which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. Jefferson never joined a Unitarian church, but he did attend Unitarian services while in Philadelphia (Joseph Priestley's home town until his 1804 death) and spoke highly of those services.^[citation needed] 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. In an 1822 letter to Benjamin Waterhouse he wrote, "I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its conscience to neither kings or priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."^[33]

Jefferson continued to express his strong objections to the doctrines of the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity. In a letter to Adams (April 11, 1823), Jefferson wrote, "And the day will come, 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." In an 1821 letter he wrote:

“ No one sees with greater pleasure than myself the progress of reason in its advances towards rational Christianity. When we shall have done away the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since His day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines He inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily His disciples; and my opinion is that if nothing had ever been added to what flowed purely from His lips, the whole world would at this day have been Christian. I know that the case you cite, of Dr. Drake, has been a common one. The religion-builders have so distorted and deformed the doctrines of Jesus, so muffled them in mysticisms, fancies and falsehoods, have caricatured them into forms so monstrous and inconceivable, as to shock reasonable thinkers, to revolt them against the whole, and drive them rashly to pronounce its Founder an impostor. Had there never been a commentator, there never would have been an infidel... I have little doubt that the whole of our country will soon be rallied ” to the unity of the Creator, and, I hope, to the pure doctrines of Jesus also.^[35]

To the minister of the First Parish Church (Unitarian) in Portland, Maine, Jefferson once requested the services of a Unitarian minister for himself and for a small group of friends. The reply was that there was no one available to be sent so far away. In an 1825 letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, Jefferson wrote:

“ *I am anxious to see the doctrine of one god commenced in our state. But the population of my neighborhood is too slender, and is too much divided into other sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be contented to be **an Unitarian by myself**, altho I know there are many around me who would become so, if once they could hear the questions fairly stated.* ^[7] ”

When followers of Richard Price and Priestley began debating over the existence of free-will and the soul (Priestley had taken the materialist position^[36]), Jefferson expressed reservations that Unitarians too were finding it important to dispute doctrine with one another, and in 1822 held the Quakers up as an example for them to emulate.^[37]

In Jefferson's time, Unitarianism was generally considered a branch of Christianity. Unitarianism no longer implies belief in a deity; some Unitarians are theists and some are not. Modern Unitarians consider Jefferson both a kindred spirit and an important figure in their history. The *Famous UUs* website^[38] says:

“ *Like many others of his time (he died just one year after the founding of institutional Unitarianism in America), Jefferson was a Unitarian in theology, though not in church membership. He never joined a Unitarian congregation: there were none near his home in Virginia during his lifetime. He regularly attended Joseph Priestley's Pennsylvania church when he was nearby, and said that Priestley's theology was his own, and there is no doubt Priestley should be identified as Unitarian. Jefferson remained a member of the Episcopal congregation near his home, but removed himself from those available to become godparents, because he was not sufficiently in agreement with the Trinitarian theology. His work, the *Jefferson Bible*, was Unitarian in theology...* ”

Though he had a lifelong esteem for Jesus' moral teachings, Jefferson did not believe in miracles, nor in the divinity of Jesus. As early as 1788 he clearly rejected the Christian doctrine of the "Trinity" (letter to Derieux, July 25, 1788). While many biographers have characterized Jefferson as a Deist, nowhere does he call himself a Deist, though he does praise Jesus for what he (Jefferson) considered a form of deism in an 1803 letter to Priestley,^[39] and again in an 1817 letter to John Adams.^[40]

Terminology Jefferson used in the United States Declaration of Independence, such as "Nature's God", is typical Deist terminology. It is also typical of non-Deist thinkers like Francis Hutcheson and Cicero, both of whom influenced Jefferson's thinking.^{[41][42]}

General remarks

Biographer Merrill D. Peterson summarizes Jefferson's theology:

“ *First, that the Christianity of the churches was unreasonable, therefore unbelievable, but that stripped of priestly mystery, ritual, and dogma, reinterpreted in the light of historical evidence and human experience, and substituting the Newtonian cosmology for the discredited Biblical one, Christianity could be conformed to reason. Second, morality required no divine sanction or inspiration, no appeal beyond reason and nature, perhaps not even the hope of heaven or the fear of hell; and so the whole edifice of Christian revelation came tumbling to the ground.*”^[43]

In Peterson's view, Jefferson and Thomas Paine, the prominent deist, "agreed in the essentials of their theistic faith." Noting that Jefferson never had a deep or moving religious experience, Peterson adds that he "rejected revelation, the divinity of Christ, the miracles, the atonement, and so on, without which Christianity was nothing in the eyes of believers. He did not even accept Jesus on his own terms, for Jesus was a spiritualist by the grace of God and he a materialist by the grace of science."^[44]

Robert S. Alley, professor of humanities emeritus at the University of Richmond holds^[45] that "Any perusal of the Jefferson writings will establish that the Sage of Monticello was a Deist".

Likewise, Avery Dulles, a leading Catholic theologian reports, "In his college years at William and Mary, [Jefferson] came to admire Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke as three great paragons of wisdom. Under the influence of several professors, he converted to the deist philosophy."^[46] Dulles concludes:

“ *In summary, then, Jefferson was a deist because he believed in one God, in divine providence, in the divine moral law, and in rewards and punishments after death; but did not believe in supernatural revelation. He was a Christian deist because he saw Christianity as the highest expression of natural religion and Jesus as an incomparably great moral teacher. He was not an orthodox Christian because he rejected, among other things, the doctrines that Jesus was the promised Messiah and the incarnate Son of God. Jefferson's religion is fairly typical of the American form of deism in his day.*”

Dulles concurs with historian Stephen Webb, who states that Jefferson's frequent references to "Providence" indicate his Deism, as "most eighteenth-century deists believed in providence."^[47]