

The Religious Freedom of Thomas Jefferson

Derek Jackson
April 6, 2017

The Religious Freedom of Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson crafted himself into one of the most well-known politicians and philosophers in American history. He authored the Declaration of Independence, founded the University of Virginia, and served as the third President of the United States. However, from his explicit instructions for the inscription on his gravestone, Jefferson wanted it to list his three greatest achievements, which did not include his presidency. Instead, he listed the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom as his other important accomplishment.¹ To understand this third pillar of Jefferson's life, this paper focuses on Jefferson's religious journey from his youth through his presidency, revealing a man deeply conflicted by the rituals, practices, and mysticism of many established religions, but also a fervently religious man, who sought his own truth through a mixture of religious morals and rationalism.

Thomas Jefferson largely kept his personal religious beliefs to himself, only commenting on religion generally as it affected the public.² He once commented, when asked for information on his beliefs, "Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my god and myself alone."³ Particularly in his early life, Jefferson's desire to keep his religious beliefs private, along with a fire destroying his early papers in 1770, left little documented evidence remaining of his religious journey as a youth.⁴ However, looking at colonial Virginia's religious climate reveals some part of that lost information as Jefferson grew up in a Virginia entrenched in an Anglican belief system that the Church of England heavily enforced.⁵ The Anglican Church officially enforced attendance and rejected the practice of any other religion through legislation in 1610, which carried increasing levels of punishment for dissent including whippings and six months

imprisonment on ships going to sea.⁶ Colonists who chose not to attend Anglican services paid a stiff fine, and dissenters found themselves heavily taxed. Further, government officials had to claim allegiance to the Anglican Church, and Anglican ministers served as the primary teachers at local schools; in fact, Anglicans served as the faculty and staff of the Virginia Colony's solitary source of higher education, the College of William and Mary.⁷ Religion, then, dominated life for the colonists in nearly every respect, including the law and politics.⁸

When looking back on this time in his life, Jefferson said: "our minds were circumscribed within narrow limits."⁹ The Church of England established the belief system of Virginia, and as a way of life, families raised their children from birth in the Anglican faith, which stood as a compromise for the Christian faith between the excess of Roman Catholicism and the economized Calvinism.¹⁰ Born in Shadwell, Virginia in 1743, Jefferson likewise grew up in this environment, baptized as a child into the Anglican Church.¹¹ While no record exists of the baptism, Jefferson's father, Peter Jefferson, worked as a vestryman for the Fredericksville parish, and most likely saw to the event.¹²

Many other events over the course of Jefferson's life took place in the Anglican Church, even as it changed names after the American Revolution to the Episcopal Church of Virginia; he buried his parents, married, and saw his children baptized in this church, but this evidence does little to prove anything of Jefferson's religious beliefs as none of these events required any form of declaration from Jefferson.¹³ The only time he needed to act in an official capacity that related to the church, he actually declined. Jefferson refused a friend's offer to act as a godfather because he could not make a "solemn profession, before god and the world, of faith in articles, which I had never sense enough to comprehend," and he then finished by highlighting one of his

significant struggles with the mystic elements of Christianity by saying, “it has always appeared to me that comprehension must precede assent.”¹⁴

Jefferson’s lifetime devotion to what became the Episcopal Church came naturally from his upbringing and early life in Virginia, yet his personal beliefs evolved beyond those of the Episcopal Church as he grew older and more educated. At the age of nine, Jefferson started his education under an Anglican minister named William Douglas, a teacher the young Jefferson found lacking, complaining about his deficiencies in Greek and Latin.¹⁵ A few years later, Jefferson’s life quickly changed when his father died in 1757. Peter Jefferson worked hard to ensure his son a proper education, since he never received one himself, and Thomas Jefferson later wrote about his gratitude towards his father for giving him such “a sublime luxury”.¹⁶

The year his father died, Jefferson’s education took a turn for the better when he started studying under a new teacher. James Maury was also an Anglican minister, but more important for Jefferson, he was a proper scholar of the classics.¹⁷ After graduating from the College of William and Mary, Maury returned to Virginia and opened a school for boys. Here Jefferson studied language, history, law, and the Bible and had access to Maury’s library of over four hundred books, which sparked Jefferson’s intellectual curiosity and set the stage for his entrance into William and Mary.¹⁸ Interestingly, while the Anglican Church played such a large part of his formative years, Jefferson never showed any major inclination towards Anglican beliefs, showing instead a later inner turmoil in regards to his early religious upbringing. It is likely that Jefferson accepted his family’s religion as a child and refined his own personal beliefs once away at the College of William and Mary.¹⁹

While Jefferson faced strong Anglican influence in his educational history, He always attached himself to the more liberal minded mentors where he could find them. William Small

acted as one such mentor to Jefferson, during his time at William and Mary. Small was the only faculty member at the time who was not a part of the clergy, and he taught mathematics as his main job at the college.²⁰ His real influence on Jefferson came when he started lecturing on ethics, rhetoric, and belles lettres as the temporary chair of philosophy. Speaking on his regard of Small as a professor, Jefferson said learning under him “probably fixed the destinies of my life.” This may be in large part because Small befriended Jefferson outside of the classroom, introducing him to Enlightenment teachings.²¹

As Enlightenment thinking took hold in America and Jefferson began to study Enlightenment philosophies more closely, he started applying rational inquiry to certain elements of Christianity that he found disagreeable.²² Particularly, Jefferson admitted that, from an early age, he struggled with the “difficulty of reconciling the ideas of Unity and Trinity,” which ultimately did not pass his rationality tests.²³ The writings of Viscount Henry St. John Bolingbroke influenced Jefferson’s changing views on religion at this time, and Jefferson filled his notebook with entries relating to Bolingbroke’s writings on Christianity. Bolingbroke found much of the Christian mythos incompatible with rational thought and analysis, including the miracles and divinity of Jesus and the malevolent god of the Old Testament.²⁴ Jefferson began to reject these superstitious elements of Christianity as well, and read the Bible from a more rational perspective, focusing on the morals presented in the book and the human aspect of Jesus.²⁵

Jefferson continued to try and bring together the moral necessity of organized religion in society and Enlightenment rationality, and his views began to follow Deist notions. Jefferson agreed with the existence of a creator and believed that people could see the evidence in the order of the natural world that God continuously maintained, and mankind could discover this

rationally through observation of natural laws like gravity.²⁶ Then, having replaced the god of revelation with one of reason, Jefferson sought an answer for Christian morality. Here, he turned to the writings of Lord Henry Home Kames, who talked of an internal moral sense the creator gives to each person at birth, but one that only education nurtures.²⁷ These ideas served as the foundation for Jefferson's belief system as he left school and entered the next stage of his life, and they aligned with his increasing belief in freedom of thought as a necessity for finding truth.²⁸ Jefferson later passed on his strong conviction in the importance of reason to his nephew in 1787 saying, "Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."²⁹

While Jefferson developed his beliefs through higher education, the common man's America still turned to religion for guidance in most matters. The spread of Enlightenment rationalism to the colonies did little to slow the growth of the Church of England, and the established religion remained the dominant force in the lives of most people, remaining an oppressive and discriminatory power.³⁰ Jefferson, with a strong belief in reason, nature, and freedom of the mind, began a political career shortly after school. He left behind a brief stretch working in law to take a position in the House of Burgesses in 1769, and quickly found himself a representative, arguing against the growing oppression of England.³¹

Even at this early stage of his career, Jefferson argued, in his *Summary View of the Rights of British Americans*, for natural rights: "the God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time." Jefferson followed this the next year with his work on the Declaration of Independence, which John Adams declined because he thought Jefferson's writing skills were much better.³² In this work, Jefferson expresses his carefully honed moral and religious views on natural law again in the language of the Declaration. He makes a clear statement that some rights God gives

innately and come before the establishment of any governing body: “the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them.”³³ Jefferson’s main intent with the Declaration had nothing to do with raising new arguments; his only concern was presenting “the common sense of the subject” and hoping for a rational response.³⁴

During the ensuing fight for independence during the American Revolution, Jefferson looked to the future and for a way of securing religious freedom as well. The growing dissent against the Anglican Church, by groups like Presbyterians and Baptists, found new numbers thanks to the Great Awakening, which raised religious zeal and succeeded in converting many people away from the Church of England. At least, the dissenters of the Anglican Church in Virginia had their growing numbers behind them at the start of the war, which they used to try and leverage full religious freedom for war support.³⁵ Though they were partially successful in gaining some reform in marriage laws and tax reductions, they failed to gain full freedom from persecution, so Jefferson drafted a Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, which failed to gain any traction in the Virginia State Assembly.³⁶ The Assembly had a few issues related to the idea of full freedom of religion, which would allow the justification of any behavior no matter how depraved, but also the way Jefferson framed his argument using Enlightenment principles; His preamble read: “the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds,” which the assembly thought to abstract and passive.³⁷

In the years during the war against England, dissenting ministers defended themselves against escalating physical attacks and jail time, though they at least utilized their jail time effectively, preaching while incarcerated.³⁸ By 1785, the dissenters created such a backlash with petitions to the Assembly to keep government out of religious matters that James Madison was

able to re-propose Jefferson's Statute as Jefferson could not do so himself while working in Paris in 1786.³⁹ With several modifications, including a change to the Enlightenment language of the preamble to the more acceptable, "Whereas Almighty God hath made the mind free....," the Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom passed through both houses of the General Assembly.⁴⁰ There was one further edit that the Assembly turned down related to the replacement of Jefferson's vague reference to the "holy author of our religion," which some legislators wanted to change to "Jesus Christ" in the document. As Jefferson states, "the insertion 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."⁴¹

As Jefferson continued to pursue his political career, he also reached a turning point in his religious beliefs. While in France Jefferson came in contact with philosophers who carried radical religious beliefs, and he decided to rethink some aspects of his own religious background that he discarded much earlier; particularly, Jefferson struggled with the place of Jesus in his belief system.⁴² It was Joseph Priestley with his Unitarian movement who helped Jefferson reconcile his shaken beliefs, and Jefferson confessed to reading Priestley's work, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, "over and over again."⁴³

Priestley's *Corruptions* outlined two major doctrines that changed the most pure form of Christianity; first, the idea of the Trinity, and second, the idea of a separate spirit.⁴⁴ Priestley also discussed other corrupt religious leaders and rulers who have changed Christianity over time to fit their own dubious needs.⁴⁵ Jefferson found his religious beliefs lined up well with Priestley's Unitarian religion; stripped of the mysticism Jefferson could never accept, the Unitarian belief saw Jesus as a human man on a mission to share moral teachings for a benevolent God.

However, Jefferson's beliefs differed from Priestley's in a few key areas like the concept of soul sleep, which had humans die and decay, but resurrect later; in reality, Jefferson fit his own beliefs into Priestley's Unitarian structure and ignored what did not work for him.⁴⁶ When discussing his new beliefs 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."⁴⁷

Jefferson always insisted on his privacy regarding religion: "the subject of religion, a subject on which I have ever been most scrupulously reserved. I have considered it as a matter between every man and his maker, in which no other, & far less the public, had a right to intermeddle."⁴⁸ Jefferson's desire for his religious privacy caused him to suffer attacks from his political enemies, especially during the 1800 presidential campaign against John Adams, where his longtime enemy, Alexander Hamilton, called him "an atheist in religion and a fanatic in politics."⁴⁹ Therefore, it is no surprise Jefferson tried to maintain an outward appearance of Christian piety, even if he did so most often to avoid controversy.⁵⁰

Jefferson spent his whole adult life looking for a set of religious beliefs free of the mysticism that clashed with his philosophical reasoning. He believed in a creator from an early age, but this belief evolved into that of a creator who revealed himself through natural wonder and natural law. This came from Jefferson's need to believe in something that could still be rationalized empirically, and he found this religious foundation through Enlightenment ideas. His lifelong exploration of his own personal religion sparked his political drive to fight for religious liberty, so other people could decide for themselves what they wanted to believe and how they wanted to express that belief. Later, Jefferson searched for the best way to understand the teachings of Jesus that he absorbed as a child in the Anglican Church. Ultimately, Jefferson

found the morality of Jesus and his teachings the most important aspect of Christianity, and stripped away the divinity that he found irreconcilable with his rational education. Jefferson wanted to believe in God and Jesus, and he spent his entire life devoted to the study of religion in one way or another, questioning everything and choosing his own path to truth.

Endnotes

1. "Jefferson's Gravestone," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, (<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-gravestone> (accessed April 7, 2017)).
2. "Jefferson's Religious Beliefs," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, (<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs> (accessed March 14, 2017)).
3. Eugene R. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1998) p. 14.
4. Peter S. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993) p. 21.
5. John A. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 16.
6. Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God: a religious biography of Thomas Jefferson*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996) p. 2-3.
7. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, p. 17.
8. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, p. 17.
9. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 4.
10. David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*) p. 34-35.
11. John A. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom : Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*) p. 9.
12. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 7.
13. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 9-10.
14. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, p. 15.
15. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 8.

16. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 9.
17. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 10.
18. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 10.
19. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 10-11.
20. Holmes, *The Faiths*, p. 80.
21. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 16-17.
22. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 11.
23. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, p. 15
24. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, p. 16-17.
25. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 23.
26. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 36.
27. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, p. 19.
28. Sheridan, *Jefferson and religion*, p. 19.
29. "Jefferson's Religious Beliefs," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.
30. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 576.
31. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 42-43.
32. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 46.
33. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 47.
34. Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, p. 9.
35. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 41.
36. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 41.
37. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 63-65.
38. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 54.

39. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 90.
40. Gaustad, *Sworn on the altar of God*, p. 64-65.
41. Ragosta, *Religious Freedom*, p. 91.
42. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 29.
43. Holmes, *The Faiths*, p. 82.
44. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 32.
45. Holmes, *The Faiths*, p. 82.
46. Onuf, *Jeffersonian Legacies*, p. 32.
47. "Jefferson's Religious Beliefs," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.
48. "Jefferson's Religious Beliefs," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.
49. Holmes, *The Faiths*, p. 81.
50. Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, p. 585.

Bibliography

- Gaustad, Edwin Scott. *Sworn on the altar of God: a religious biography of Thomas Jefferson*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
- Holmes, David L. *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 13, 2017).
- “Jefferson's Gravestone.” Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.
<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-gravestone> (accessed April 7, 2017).
- “Jefferson's Religious Beliefs.” Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.
<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs> (accessed March 14, 2017).
- Onuf, Peter S. *Jeffersonian Legacies*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.
- Ragosta, John A. *Religious Freedom : Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 13, 2017).
- . *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Sheridan, Eugene R. *Jefferson and religion*. Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1998.
- Wood, Gordon S. *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.