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THE RELIGIOUS OPINIONS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

Of few subjects is so little really known by the average reader ; on few is there so general a misapprehension as is the case with the exact religious views of the Sage of Monticello. It is often said that Jefferson was an infidel ; he used to be denounced as a blatant atheist. Some enthusiastic Episcopalians claim him for their communion, old Bruton Church, Williamsburg, Virginia, having recently named one of her best pews in his honor. We expect to prove that he was neither atheist nor Episcopalian.

In his own day Jefferson was often spoken of as an infidel. If the word infidel is here taken in its usual meaning, the charge was unjust ; but, if we take the alternate definition of 'infidel'— "one who rejects the doctrines of Christianity usually held in the so-called orthodox churches"—then Jefferson was an infidel. He believed in a God, the creator of all things. In the Declaration of Independence he uses the phrases "endowed by their Creator" and "nature's God". In the preamble to the act for religious freedom, he uses the language, "whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free"—and "the Holy Author of our religion". In a letter from France he uses the phrase "overruling Providence". All through his correspondence, up to his last days, he uses such phrases as "merciful Providence", "a benevolent Creator". In letters to his namesakes, he advises them to "adore God", "murmur not at the ways of Providence". So far from being an atheist he argues for the existence of an eternal Creator, a Great First Cause, and says that the infidels have always been in a minority of one to a million of believers in God. In a letter to John Adams, dated April 8, 1816, in contrasting the atheist and the theist—these are his own terms—he says that the latter, pointing to the heavens above and to the earth beneath and to the waters under the earth, asked if these did not proclaim a first cause possessing intelligence and power ; power in the production, and intelligence in the design and constant preservation of the system ; he urges the existence of final causes : that the eye was made to see and the ear to hear, and not that we see because we have eyes and hear because we

Freethinkers, predecessors of the German rationalists: he was, in many respects, what is called "an immortal Deist", though he had really no consistent opinions in religious matters.

Jefferson believed in a heaven, as a reward for those who had followed the light of conscience. In a letter to his friend Miles King, he says: "Following the guidance of a good conscience, let us be happy in the hope that by these different paths we shall all meet in the end. And that you and I may there meet and embrace is my earnest prayer." To another friend he writes: "The term is not very distant at which we are to deposit in the same cerement our own errors and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an extatic [sic] meeting with the friends we have loved and lost, and whom we shall love still and never lose again." His last words were, "I now resign my soul, without fear, to my God; my daughter, to my country."

Jefferson was undoubtedly not devoid of religious sensibilities; but his views were totally undigested, lacking in order and in consistency.

The foregoing conclusions we reached some time ago after a careful study of the writings of Jefferson. Recently we submitted a synopsis of his views to two prominent theologians without giving the name of the person holding these opinions. One of these scholars said that this man was totally ignorant on the whole subject of religion; that his views could not be classified and were entirely unworthy of serious consideration. The other said pretty much the same thing but added that he might possibly be classified as a "rationalistic Unitarian."

Jefferson declares himself a believer in the materialistic view of the soul. "Mr. Locke," he says, "openly maintained the materialism of the soul. . . . The fathers of the church of the three first centuries, if not universally, were materialists, extending even to the Creator himself; nor indeed do I know exactly in what age of the Christian church the heresy of spiritualism [sic] was introduced." Writing to John Adams he says: "To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, God, are immaterial is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no God, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise. . . . At what age of the Christian church this

heresy of immaterialism, or masked atheism, crept in, I do not know. But a heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it. He told us, indeed, that 'God is a spirit,' but he has not defined what a spirit is, nor said that it is not *matter*. And the ancient fathers of the three first centuries held it to be matter, light and thin indeed, an ethereal gas, but still matter."

Jefferson believed in natural religion and rejected inspiration and revelation. "Reason is our only guide." "We are accountable to God alone for our religious views." The apostles, he says, made the most puerile and erroneous statements as to Jesus and his work. Shortly after His death, His followers corrupted His pure moral precepts into an engine for enslaving mankind and aggrandizing priesthood and priestcraft. His system of morals, though the purest ever given to man, was adulterated and sophisticated into a mere contrivance to *filch wealth and power to themselves*, denouncing as infidels all who were not able to swallow their impious heresies. The teachings of Christ have come down to us mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible."

"Jefferson's Bible" is one of the "Curiosities of Literature." This book, called by him *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, was published by Congress in the year 1904. From the four evangelists he selects those passages which describe the merely human side of Christ's life and give his "sublime moral doctrines." All references to his miraculous birth, the testimony of responsible witnesses to his miracles and to the supernatural side of his life, are scrupulously omitted. For instance, in Luke I, he gives verses 1-7, inclusive, describing the human aspect of the birth of Christ, but omits verses 8-20, in which the angels announce to the shepherds that "this day there is born in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Verse 21 of the same chapter he cuts in half, omitting the part which tells that the child Jesus was named "before he was conceived in the womb." In the same chapter he omits verses 22-38, no doubt because they contain the recognition of the infant as the "Lord's Christ" by Simeon and Anna. This omitted passage contains the *Nunc Dimittis*, one of the gems of the Christian liturgies. Shall we infer that this was a part of the

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twaddle and nonsense injected into the record by fanatics, imbeciles, and *impostors*, to further their schemes of imposture, chicanery, and "roguery"?

The record of the crucifixion he edits in the same manner. In John 19, he quotes circumstantially the ordinary, natural events of the crucifixion but omits the passage in which the apostle, sixty years after the event, says in substance: "I saw these things with my own eyes. . . . The soldiers, in not breaking His bones and in piercing His side fulfilled predictions of the ancient prophets of Israel." He cuts out also the passages in which heathen soldiers cried out, "Truly this man was the son of God."

Is this fair? Is this ingenuous? Is this the kind of criticism that Jefferson applied to political papers and documents? If the fanatics, enthusiasts, and misguided simpletons can be trusted in forty verses of a chapter, why is their testimony in regard to three verses to be rejected?

After all, is Jefferson's opinion on religious subjects worth reckoning with? Is his opinion worthy of serious considerations? Let us see whether he devoted much of his time to religious matters; whether he even really "searched the scriptures" half as earnestly as thousands of our readers do.

At the age of fifty-eight, in writing to the Reverend Isaac Story he says: "When a young man, I indulged in speculations as to the future life, but *for many years I have ceased to read or to think concerning them.*" "Writing to a friend June 11, 1825, he says: "Mine has been too much a life of action to allow my mind to wander from the occurrences pressing on it." In 1819, in a letter to the Reverend Ezra Stiles, acknowledging a copy of a work on metaphysics, he says that he has been too busy all his life to devote much thought to such branches of study. In short, he devoted less time to the great problems of religion than to any one great problem of politics. He was a mere amateur, a mere dabbler in religion. His opinions on religious subjects are worth no more than the writer's opinions as to conducting a spool-cotton factory. Why should young men be influenced by his crass views on religious subjects?

We shall close with extracts from "A Profession of Faith",

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penned by a famous man of the Revolutionary era. It is typical of that "age of reason"; it sounds like a résumé of opinions outlined above:—

"I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

"I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-workers happy.

"I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

"All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

"[He] takes up the trade of priest for the sake of gain, and, in order to qualify himself for that trade, he begins with a perjury."

This might have been written by Jefferson, but was written by Thomas Paine.

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have ears—an answer, he says, obvious to the senses. This we recognize as the old argument from design used by Socrates and given by Xenophon in his *Memorabilia*, and called by theologians of our day the teleological argument.

Interesting light is thrown upon Jefferson's ideas as to God by his saying in a letter to Mrs. John Adams, dated January 11, 1817: "That God is an essentially benevolent Being is shown by His goodness in stealing away our faculties of enjoyment one by one, searing our sensibilities, until, satiated and fatigued by this ceaseless iteration, we ask our own *congé*."

So much for Jefferson's atheism.

As already said, Jefferson is sometimes claimed by Episcopalians. In one of the encyclopædias we are told that Jefferson was at one time a vestryman. There is a tradition in Charlottesville, Virginia, that he was elected to the vestry of the church in that town shortly after its organization, but there are no records to prove it. If it should prove true that he was a vestryman, this would have very little significance. The canons of the Episcopal church in Virginia on the subject of vestrymen and their qualifications were very lax in Jefferson's day and long after. A man might sit in the vestry and yet hold very erratic views on religious subjects. For instance, when one of the leading Episcopal churches of Richmond, Virginia, was organized, a reputed infidel was elected to its vestry and was afterwards dropped in a congregational uprising. Even now in the diocese of Virginia, that is, the diocese of which Richmond is the "see-city," there are no religious tests applied in the vestry elections, and in Southern Virginia, whose "see-city" is Norfolk, such tests have but recently been adopted. In some dioceses there have been vestrymen holding office quite recently who knew less about "the doctrines, worship and discipline of the Protestant Episcopal Church" than they did about the Russian Douma.

Even if Jefferson sometimes attended the Episcopal church; even if he sometimes served as a vestryman, he was in his religious views everything but an Episcopalian. And as many of our readers are not Episcopalians, it will be in order to state in detail some of the fundamental doctrines of ~~that~~ church.

especially those which are recited every Sunday in the creeds and formulas.

First: Jesus Christ is "very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father." Jefferson constantly asserts that Christ was not divine and never claimed to be divine; that he was a great philosopher, a great moral teacher, the author of the most perfect system of moral philosophy ever devised by man, greater than Epictetus, Seneca, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and other philosophical teachers.

Second: Jesus Christ was "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary"; that he was born without human generation, so that even in this day of almost unlimited religious toleration, ministers are deposed for denying "the virgin birth" of Christ. On this subject Jefferson says, in a letter to John Adams (April 11, 1823), that *the day will come when the account of the birth of Christ as accepted in the Trinitarian churches will be classed with the fable of Minerva springing from the brain of Jupiter.*

Third: The third day "Christ rose again, according to the scriptures", and on this doctrine of the resurrection she stakes her whole existence. This same doctrine Jefferson utterly rejects, believing that Christ died like any other philosopher—as a man and not as a God. He speaks of Christ frequently in such terms as "this great reformer", "this first of human sages", "the benevolent and sublime reformer of the Jewish religion", "the benevolent moralist", occasionally using the conventional term "our Saviour", but never referring to Christ as the divine Saviour of mankind. He speaks of Him as a great moralist but *immature and undeveloped, and subject to serious limitations as a religious teacher.* The Episcopal church teaches, in her formularies, that Christ is, in eternity, wisdom, power, and omniscience, coequal with the Father and subject to no limitations as a promulgator of moral and religious truth.

Again: the Episcopal Church reads in her services, the "lessons", as she calls them, that it was the Son who created the world. She believes that, while on earth, he performed miracles; that he ascended visibly into heaven in the presence of above five hundred witnesses, the greater part of whom were living when Saint Paul wrote his epistles to the Corinthians; that man

was born a sinner but becomes an heir of salvation by the imputed righteousness of Christ; that the only means of salvation is found in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross; that in baptism men are regenerate and born anew of water and of the Spirit; that "it is evident to all men diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient authors that from the Apostles' time there have been three orders of ministers in Christ's Church—Bishops, Priests, and Deacons"—and that there are three persons in the Godhead but only one God. All these, together with the true and essential divinity of Christ, his miraculous virgin birth by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, his resurrection, his appearance among his apostles for forty days, and his ascension into heaven, are clearly set forth in the creeds and in the Thirty-nine Articles. Let us see how many of these doctrines were held by Jefferson.

In a letter to William Short, dated October 31, 1817, Jefferson, speaking of "artificial systems invented by ultra-Christian sects", "doctrines added to the teachings of Christ without any authority from Him", names the following: "the immaculate conception [of Christ], 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 of hierarchy." What is left to believe in? Let us take up the foregoing clauses in detail.

Of Jefferson's view of the miraculous birth of Christ we have already spoken, quoting the startling comparison with the myth of Minerva. As to the deification of Christ, Jefferson says he never claimed to be divine. In a letter to Benjamin Rush, dated April 31, 1803, he says: "I am a Christian in the only sense in which he 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."

As said already, he regarded Christ as the greatest of moral philosophers. In a letter dated April 19, 1803, he characterized "the moral precepts of Jesus" as more pure, correct, and sublime than those of the ancient philosophers. "They extended their cares scarcely beyond our kindred and friends individually

and our country in the abstract. Jesus embraced, with charity and philanthropy, our neighbors, our countrymen, and the whole family of mankind."

Is this the language of an Episcopalian? Can the writer of such sentences recite the creeds, and end his prayers with the phrase "through Jesus Christ our Lord"? Can he stand up and say, "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten not made"?

Coming to the Trinity. The Episcopal church has always been Trinitarian. One of her high festivals is Trinity Sunday. Her longest season is the Trinity season, numbering nearly half her Sundays with reference to their time "after Trinity". In the prayers and litanies, she calls upon Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as coequal in dignity and in power. She teaches her children to believe in "God the Father, who made me and all the world"; in "God the Son, who redeemed me and all mankind"; and in "God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me and all the people of God". Let us see whether Jefferson could possibly stand up in a pew and use such language.

In a letter (November 4, 1820) to Jared Sparks, he says: "The religion of Jesus is founded on the unity of God, and this principle chiefly gave it triumph over the rabble of heathen gods then acknowledged." In a letter of February 27, 1821, to Timothy Pickering, he characterizes the doctrine of the Trinity as "the *incomparable jargon* of the Trinitarian arithmetic that three are one and one is three." In a letter of December 8, 1822, he says: "The hocus-pocus phantasm of a God *like another Cerberus*, with one body and three heads, had its birth and growth in the blood of thousands and thousands of martyrs."

A special object of Jefferson's abomination is Athanasius, the leader of the Trinitarians in the council of Nicæa. The "fanatic Athanasius", he excoriates in many of his letters. "The impious dogmatists as Athanasius and Calvin", he writes to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822.

Another object of his virulence is the Apostle Paul, so dear to every Christian believer. Him he denounces as the *chief corrupter of the doctrines of Christ*.

Almost the only doctrine of the Episcopal Church held by Jefferson was a belief in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."

Certainly no Episcopalian can afford to claim him as a fellow-Churchman.

Next, Jefferson is often claimed by the Unitarians. Let us see what they believe.

The foremost Unitarian of Jefferson's day was the Reverend William Ellery Channing. His sermons contain an epitome of the Unitarian doctrine. He speaks continually of "one God", the "Universal Parent", the "Universal Father", "one Supreme God", indivisible. So far his teachings run parallel with the opinions of Jefferson.

Christ, says Dr. Channing, is the "greatest of the sons of God", but not God. He *works miracles*, but nowhere claims to be divine. "Trinity" is a man-made doctrine, without any warrant in scripture. Christ is "the conqueror of death", "the heir of immortality", "the *divine messenger*", gone before us into heaven. He always speaks of Christ in terms of reverence, of love, and of worship, yielding Him all honor and glory, but not admitting that He is a member of the Godhead.

Of the Apostle Paul, Channing speaks frequently and reverently, quoting him as an inspired teacher.

Dr. Channing believes firmly in *miracles* and in immortality, emphasizing the resurrection of Christ. The whole Bible he regards as God's revelation to man. He believes firmly in the inspiration of the Scriptures, and accepts the Bible account of the miracles wrought by Christ and his apostles.

Dr. Channing and other prominent Unitarians believe in the utter sincerity of the apostles and the other sacred writers. No slur against Saint Paul or any other apostle ever passes their lips. The daily companions of Christ, together with St. Paul himself, are treated with the respect and awe usually rendered them by all Christian bodies.

Let us compare Jefferson's opinions with those outlined above.

That he denounces Saint Paul as the chief corrupter of the doctrines of Christ, we have seen already.

Jefferson does not believe in miracles, in inspiration, in revela-

tion. He regards the apostles not only as not infallible but as ignorant and fallible men, liable to serious error. "The teachings of Christ," says he, "have come down to us mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible." The apostles and evangelists make the most puerile and erroneous statements as to Christ and his work. They wrote from memory long after they had heard Him declare His doctrines; much was forgotten, much misunderstood, much presented in very paradoxical form.

Everything miraculous is rejected. All the parts of the Bible in which miracles are recounted were written by enthusiasts, *dupes*, and *impostors*, who added to the record things which Christ never said or dreamed of.

If Dr. Channing was a Unitarian, what was Jefferson?

We say without hesitation that he was neither Atheist, nor Episcopalian, nor Unitarian. Let us see whether any sect or party may claim him.

He believed in one God, undivided, indivisible. He believed in religion, but despised sectarianism, ministers, ecclesiasts, and ecclesiasticism. "Reason is our only guide." He believed that the ministers of religion, the "priests", as he called them, were principally concerned with "the loaves and fishes". The Bible, as used in the churches, was a tissue of impostures devised for the subjugation of the human mind and for priestly aggrandizement. A new Bible, purged of all superhuman elements, is sorely needed, and he urges some friends to edit such a volume.

The above paragraph, together with his hatred of Saint Paul, puts him very near the Deists. Who will venture to classify him with any Christian body?

"I am a real Christian," says he,— "that is to say, a disciple of the doctrine of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call *me* infidel and themselves Christians and preachers of the gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said nor saw."

Some people of his day thought that Jefferson was a Socinian: he claimed to be a Unitarian. That he did great harm among the young men of Virginia, we may say upon very high authority of his own day.

Professor George Tucker, one of Jefferson's biographers, says that he claimed to be a Unitarian, but that his creed was "nearer to the Socinian than to any other, though it could not perhaps be classed with any particular sect." Jefferson sometimes uses the terms 'Unitarianism' and 'primitive Christianity' as synonymous. He was especially fond of Dr. Joseph Priestley, the eminent Unitarian scientist and theologian. While living in Philadelphia he attended Unitarian services. In a letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, he expresses the hope that every young man in the United States will die a Unitarian. In another letter to Dr. Waterhouse, he says: "I am anxious to see the doctrine of one god commenced in our state. . . . I must be contented to be an Unitarian by myself, although I know there are many around me who would become so if they could hear the question fairly stated."

If 'Unitarian' means 'anti-Trinitarian', we might accept Jefferson's classification of his opinions. His bitterness against Athanasius and his comparison of the Trinity to the mythological Cerberus, make him the arch-champion of the anti-Trinitarian but do not bring him near the Unitarians of America.

Jefferson speaks also of "the *weakness* of Jesus." "The doctrines which he really delivered were *defective* as a whole." "It is not to be understood that I am with him in all his doctrines." "Christ," he goes on to say, "fought his enemies with their own weakness: evasion, *subterfuge* and *cunning*." If this is shocking, prepare for something worse yet from this alleged vestryman and canonized churchman. In a letter to William Short, he says: "There are, I acknowledge, passages not free from objection which we may with probability ascribe to Jesus himself; but claiming indulgence from the circumstances under which he acted. . . . The office of reformer of the superstitions of a nation is ever dangerous. Jesus had to walk over the perilous confines of reason and religion; and a step to right or left might place him within the grasp of the priests of the superstitions, a blood-thirsty race, as cruel and remorseless as the being whom they represented as the God of Israel. They were constantly laying snares, too, to entangle him in the web of the law. He was justifiable, therefore, in

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avoiding these by evasion, by *sophisms*, by misconstructions and misapprehensions of scraps of the prophets, and in defending himself with these their own weapons, as sufficient, *ad homines*, at least." In another place, he says that Christ held out eternal life as a prize for good behavior, and intimates that Christ thus displayed great adroitness and worldly wisdom.

In what catechism or "confession" is such a view of Christ given? What Christian body will vote Jefferson a tablet in its church?

We have already placed Jefferson near the Deists or Free-thinkers. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, called "the Father of Deism", declared that the five divinely-planted, original, indefensible concepts of the human mind are: (1) There is one Supreme God; (2) He is to be worshiped; (3) worship consists chiefly of virtue and piety; (4) we must repent of our sins and cease from them; (5) there are rewards and punishments here and hereafter. Woolston, one of the principal Deists of England, by his *bitter invectives against the clergy*, against all priest-craft and priesthood, added a new feature to deistic literature (1669-1731). Blount, another prominent deist, instituted a comparison between the miracles of Apollonius of Tyana and those of Christ. He assaulted the doctrine of a mediator as irreligious, and joined Herbert in the view that many of the errors in religion or most of them have been invented by sagacious men in the interest of themselves and their own class, and for the purpose of holding down the ignorant masses. This bitter view is upheld by Bolingbroke (1678-1751), another prominent deist. All these writers taught that religion was a faithful following of the eternal laws of morality; that men should adore the Creator, avoiding all factitious forms of worship as worse than useless. They rejected the miraculous; rejected the doctrine of the Trinity; protested against mediatorship, the atonement, and the imputed righteousness of Christ, emphasizing the teaching of Christ but minimizing the teaching of the church about Him. One special *object of their scorn was the Apostle Paul*, as we are explicitly told by a high authority. All this brings Jefferson pretty close to the school of Voltaire, Bolingbroke, Shaftesbury, and Thomas Paine, the Deists, or