

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

by

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A THESIS

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by

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to ascertain the religious opinions of Thomas Jefferson and to observe the effect of these opinions on his life and time. The thesis is based primarily on Jefferson's works, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia and the Jefferson Bible. Although much secondary material is available, the works of Jefferson were mainly used in the preparation of this thesis in order to try to give as accurate a picture as possible of Jefferson's religious concepts.

Jefferson was raised in an Anglican background but maintained very little contact with the church throughout his life. Soon after his arrival at William and Mary College his views concerning religion began to change. In his early adult years he rejected almost all of the Anglican teachings of his heritage. At William and Mary he was influenced by three liberal thinkers, William Small, George Wythe, and Francis Fauquier. These men played a large part in the development of Jeffersonian theology.

Jefferson for the most part rejected the institutional church of his day, seeing within the church a corruption of the primitive teachings of Jesus. Churchmen suppressed the people and remained in control of religion for economic reasons. Theologians were also denounced by Jefferson as being in league with other churchmen to retain control of

the church. Jefferson's theology incorporated aspects of deism and Unitarianism. He rejected the idea of miracles and divine inspiration. He advocated the idea that God could best be served by being a good moral person. God could be found by viewing nature. As a result, his theology is sometimes referred to as "natural religion". Jefferson did not accept the idea of the Trinity. He regarded Christ as the greatest of ancient moral teachers but not the Son of God. Jefferson placed the moral teachings of Christ into a volume known today as the Jefferson Bible. He accepted the concept of an afterlife where good was rewarded and evil punished.

Jefferson brought his religious ideas into practical application by his work to bring into being the Statute for Religious Freedom in Virginia and his efforts to keep the University of Virginia free from teaching religion.

Jefferson rejected his own Anglican background, developed a personal theological system and sought to create a sphere of influence whereby all religious groups could practice as they saw fit. Unorthodox in his theology and a crusader for religious freedom, Jefferson was able to establish a pattern that has continued until today.

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## CHAPTER I

### JEFFERSON'S RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

For his accomplishments in the development of the United States, Thomas Jefferson is rated as one of the greatest of Americans. Of course, the most widely known of Jefferson's contributions toward the establishment of the republic is his authorship of the Declaration of American Independence. But this Founding Father of the American Republic had a number of diverse interests and talents. Jefferson was an agriculturist, an inventor, an author and a scientist. One area of intense concern to Jefferson, religion, has generally been overlooked in the many studies of Jefferson. Although considerable significance is placed on Jefferson's work to separate church and state and his bill for religious tolerance in Virginia, little is known of his concern for harmony of the gospels. Actually, as far as it is known, Thomas Jefferson was the only president to spend evenings in the White House collecting and arranging the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup>

Every man has some form of theology; the theology may not be systematized or logically thought out, but each man holds some type of religious views. Jefferson's religious convictions have long been misunderstood if not misrepresented. To gain insight into Jefferson's complex personality, one should study his religious beliefs. Jefferson

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<sup>1</sup>Edmund Fuller and David E. Green, God in the White House: The Faiths of American Presidents (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), p. 28.

was a religious person and his religious concepts influenced both his private and his public life. Jefferson believed that religion should be a prime motivation in a man's life,<sup>2</sup> and each volume of his collected writings contains numerous references to religion.

The title of this study, "Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy of Religion," refers to the Jeffersonian views on certain basic questions and problems of religious thought. Such problems and questions are the existence of God, the problem of evil, the immortality of the soul, and various more minor queries. The method of investigation could be utilized to study the basic problems, methods and assumptions of history, and with such a study, the philosophy of history. The same method might be applied in a study in science, politics, or any academic discipline. The purpose of this investigation is to reach an understanding of Thomas Jefferson's philosophy of religion.

Thomas Jefferson was born in the year 1743 to Peter and Jane Jefferson. Peter Jefferson was a self-educated, prosperous public surveyor. Jane Jefferson was descended from one of the oldest and most distinguished of families in Virginia; she could trace her ancestry back to Scotland and England. The Jefferson family was well-known and was listed among those who would make up the Virginia social register.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Jefferson's early home life was influenced by the Anglican Church. His parents were Anglican, and he was taught, however nominally,

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<sup>2</sup>Stuart Gerry Brown, Thomas Jefferson (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 109-110.



in the tenets of the Anglican faith.<sup>4</sup> Anglicanism was the established religion in Virginia, and possibly Jefferson was christened by an Anglican priest.<sup>5</sup> When Jefferson was born, the territorial parish which had been established for settlers was in the Jefferson home at Shadwell. A circuit-riding preacher would come from time to time to conduct services there. It was probably during one of these visits that Jefferson was christened. An Anglican priest officiated at Jefferson's wedding ceremony and later christened the Jefferson children.<sup>6</sup>

The closest contact Jefferson had with formal religion was with the Anglican Church. Like his father, Thomas was an elected vestryman in his home church.<sup>7</sup> Such a position had little, if any, significance beyond its social value, although only educated men were elected to the position. The personal faith of the vestrymen was rarely questioned, and as a result men such as Jefferson, who had few conventional religious beliefs, could participate in the Anglican Church.<sup>8</sup>

Little else is known concerning Jefferson's formal affiliation with the Anglican Church. As a youth, Jefferson was certainly educated by clergymen. His early training was taken under the tutorage of a

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<sup>4</sup>Claude G. Bowers, Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Ellery Bergh (ed.), The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D. C., The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), XII, p. XIV. General Acts in the Virginia Assembly, 1659, 1662, 1691, made it a punishable offense to refuse to have children christened by the Anglican Church.

<sup>6</sup>Henry V. Foote, Thomas Jefferson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1947), pp. 3-6.

<sup>7</sup>In the Anglican (Episcopal) churches, vestrymen were a group of church members who managed the temporal affairs of the church.

<sup>8</sup>Foote, op. cit., p. 8.



Scottish minister who taught Jefferson Latin, Greek and French. After the death of Peter Jefferson, Thomas, who was about fourteen years old at the time, was sent to study under another clergyman in preparation for college.

In the spring of 1760, Jefferson, at the age of seventeen, entered William and Mary College. During his stay at the college, Jefferson's religious conceptions began a radical shift. Three men influenced Jefferson in these years of study: William Small, a professor of mathematics and science; Francis Fauquier, lieutenant governor of Virginia; and George Wythe, a lawyer.<sup>9</sup> Jefferson frequently dined with these three associates. All three men had divergent interests in life; yet all had a common outlook on life. They were highly ethical while rejecting the traditional dogmas of organized religion. These two characteristics, high ethical standards and intellectual rejection of organized religion, attracted Jefferson and impelled him to begin his own research into the area of religion.<sup>10</sup>

After two years at William and Mary, Jefferson began his training in law at the law offices of George Wythe. He continued in the firm for five years, during which time his religious concepts developed further, and his beliefs became even less Anglican-oriented. Jefferson's altered beliefs were inclined toward the popular 18th-century philosophy of Deism.<sup>11</sup> Jefferson's associations with Small, Wythe and Fauquier, and his private research in religious teachings ultimately lead the young

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup>Hubert M. Morais, Deism in Eighteenth Century America (New York: Russell & Russell, 1934), p. 118.

<sup>11</sup>Foote, op. cit., p. 13.

Jefferson to reject the denominations of the day and left him with his own system of religion.

During Jefferson's youth, many of the colonies were in a state of flux because of the Great Awakening. This fiery evangelical movement had begun in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey in 1726. Springing from the Dutch Reformed Movement and guided by Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, the influence of this movement was to be felt for many years. The revival of religious enthusiasm swept into Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1734-35, and was taken up by Jonathan Edwards, a Congregationalist preacher. Hundreds reported "conversion experience" after they encountered Edwards' teachings.<sup>12</sup> The movement had several effects on the people of that period; two results were noted in the breaking down of social ranks and in the desire of churches for self-government. The movement also taught self-respect as an important concept.<sup>13</sup> In Jefferson's South, Presbyterianism grew rapidly during the 1740's and 1750's with the preaching of such men as Samuel Davis. Not only did Presbyterianism grow rapidly, but a number of other dissenting churches experienced a large growth in membership. The Great Awakening had come at a time when conventional religion was failing, and it had quickened the religious spirit in all the colonies. The movement affected the personal lives of those involved because dedication to the movement necessitated a strictness of morality as well as piety. The movement was analogous to Pietism in Germany and to the Evangelical Awakening in Great

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<sup>12</sup>Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1970), p. 465.

<sup>13</sup>J. Marcellus Kik, Church and State in the New Testament (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), p. 45.

Britain.<sup>14</sup>

A few years after the beginning of the American Great Awakening, a general indifference to religion developed again. Nearly all denominations suffered membership declines and property losses during the Revolutionary War. Ministers left the churches to become regular army officers or to join the chaplain corps. Church buildings were destroyed or severely damaged by the many battles of the war. This period of time marked an era when French skepticism and atheism made great inroads in America.<sup>15</sup>

Later, in 1792, a second Great Awakening began as a reaction to the religious apathy of the post-Revolutionary War years. This religious movement was first initiated on the Atlantic seaboard and rapidly progressed to the frontier.<sup>16</sup> By 1800, the Awakening was flourishing, led by such men as Yale President Timothy Dwight and Congregational preacher Lyman Beecher.<sup>17</sup>

Jefferson grew up in an atmosphere in which religion was considered an important part of an individual's life; he also observed the first and second Great Awakening. The years of Thomas Jefferson's childhood and early manhood were very important ones in American church history. It may be asserted, then, that religious events of the time caused some impact on Jefferson's life.

Thomas Jefferson's interest in religion became greater as he

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<sup>14</sup>Walker, op. cit., p. 466.

<sup>15</sup>Fred C. Luebke, "The Origins of Thomas Jefferson's Anti-Clericalism," Church History, XXXII (September, 1963), 345-347.

<sup>16</sup>Bill J. Humble, The Story of the Restoration (Austin: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1969), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Walker, op. cit., pp. 507-508.

reached young adulthood. As a young intellectual, he readily questioned the sectarian dogmas and researched the Bible for himself. Over a period of time, Jefferson, influenced by several forces, developed his own philosophy of life and conduct. His philosophy bore many resemblances to the Stoicism of the Greek and Roman philosophers, a fact that was completely in character with the ardent classicist.<sup>18</sup>

In Jefferson's early religious background the primary influences were Anglican, but as Jefferson furthered his education, he quickly became disenchanted with his family's religion. He began to search for a faith that would meet his own personal needs. Jefferson's research resulted in the development of an altered religious concept.

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<sup>18</sup>James Truslow Adams, The Living Jefferson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 38.



## CHAPTER II

### JEFFERSON AND ORGANIZED RELIGION

One of the most paradoxical aspects of Jefferson's life was his relationship to the institutional churches of his day. Jefferson claimed to be a Christian; yet many of the churches attacked Jefferson's character and theology. Writing to Charles Thompson on January 9, 1816, Jefferson stated, "I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus." Jefferson also wrote that he preferred the doctrines of Jesus to any other that he knew.<sup>1</sup> Although he claimed to be a Christian, Jefferson had little to do with organized religion, and despite his nominal affiliation with the Anglican Church, Jefferson never accepted its basic teachings and worship.<sup>2</sup> He studied many divergent religious views. He believed it impossible for all of the various denominations to unite in an ecumenical movement because each sect considered its interpretation of Christianity to be the true one.<sup>3</sup> Jefferson hoped that Christianity might be purified. If corrections were made, Jefferson believed Christianity could promote the moral health of the country.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 385. In a letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush dated April 21, 1803, Jefferson makes a similar statement. Writings, X, p. 380.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>3</sup>Saul K. Padover, A Jefferson Profile (New York: John Day Co., 1956), p. 247.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1948), p. 157.

"If all writers and preachers on religious questions had been of the same temper, the history of the world would have been of much more pleasing aspect."<sup>5</sup> Jefferson desired that the standards of the nation be influenced by morality. He suggested that the matter of reaching heaven depended not on the sect to which one belonged, but on the way in which one lived.<sup>6</sup> In Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, he observed that differences in religion were "advantageous" because they promoted the best of a divided Christendom. Jefferson believed that if Christianity could not be united, then the divergence of views would keep the various sects from discriminating against one another.<sup>7</sup>

Because Jefferson felt that true Christianity had been corrupted since its beginning, he was very adamant in judging the preachers and other leaders of most churches. Some of Jefferson's most outspoken opinions deal with the clergy of various churches. He believed that the church leaders were guilty of great injustice to the people, leading them away from the simple truth as taught by Jesus. Jefferson felt that far too much time was spent in preaching dogma rather than lessons on moral subjects. Most priests, he believed, were enemies of liberty who kept the public under religious control. Jefferson viewed the priests and other clergymen as oppressors of innocent people by means of the strict control of people's religious beliefs.<sup>8</sup> One historian wrote that

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<sup>5</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XII, p. 316.

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, p. 377.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), p. 160.

<sup>8</sup>Elbert D. Thomas, Thomas Jefferson (New York: Modern Age Books, 1942), p. 49.



Jefferson believed that "The lust for wealth and power . . . had caused the distortion of true Christianity from the early days of the Church on. It was perpetually behind the efforts of priests."<sup>9</sup> Another quoted Jefferson referring to printers, "like the clergy, live by the zeal they can kindle, and the schisms they can create."<sup>10</sup>

The depths of Jefferson's anticlericalism are seen in his statements in a letter to Mrs. M. Harrison Smith, written on August 6, 1816.

I recognize the same motives of goodness in the solicitude you express on the rumor supposed to proceed from a letter of mine to Charles Thomas, on the subject of the Christian religion. It is true that, in writing to the translator of the Bible and Testament, that subject was mentioned; but equally so that no adherence to any particular mode of Christianity was there expressed; nor any change of opinions suggested, a change from what? The priests indeed have heretofore thought proper to ascribe to me religious, or rather anti-religious, sentiments of their own fabric, but such soothed their resentments against the Act of Virginia for establishing religious freedom. They wish him to be thought atheist, deist, or devil, who could advocate freedom from their religious dictations, but I have ever thought religion a concern purely between our God and our consciences for which we were accountable to Him, and not to the priests. I never told my own religion nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wish to change another's creed. I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives; and by this test, my dear Madam, I have been satisfied yours must be an excellent one, to have produced a life of such exemplary virtue and correctness, for it is in our lives and not from our words, that our religion must be read. By the same test, the world must judge me. But this does not satisfy the priesthood, they must have a positive, declared assent to all their interested absurdities. My opinion is that there would never have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest. The artificial structure they have built on the purest of all moral systems for the purpose of deriving from it pence and power revolts those who think for themselves and who read in that system only what is really there. These therefore they brand with such nicknames as their enmity chooses gratuitously to impute. I have left the

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<sup>9</sup>Karl Lehmann, Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist (New York: MacMillan, 1947), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>Padover, op. cit., p. 131.

world in silence, to judge of causes from their effects; and I am consoled in this course, my dear friend, when I perceive the candor with which I am judged by your justice and discernment; and that, notwithstanding the slanders of the Saints, my fellow citizens have thought me worthy of trust. The imputations of irreligion having spent their force, they think an imputation of change might now be turned to account as a bolster for their duperies. I shall leave them as heretofore to grope on in the dark.<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson declared that the priests took "the purest religion ever preached to men" and intentionally perverted it into an adulterated form of Jesus' teachings.<sup>12</sup> Jefferson also said that these numerous doctrines of the different clergymen were "artificial systems . . . added to the teachings of Christ without any authority from Him."<sup>13</sup> Jefferson fully believed that the priests had either personal or material interest at heart rather than the spiritual well-being of people. He accused the churchmen of creating the "most perverted system that ever shone on man."<sup>14</sup> Jefferson had no patience with what he considered to be a perversion of the teachings of Christ. In a letter to Elbridge Gerry, Jefferson cited the example of the Quakers, who had learned how to govern their group without a paid ministry. He concluded that it would be better for the people if there were no paid clergy at all.<sup>15</sup> In several letters Jefferson referred to the clergy as "cannibals", "pseudo-Christians" and classed them with soothsayers.<sup>16</sup> In his Notes on the State of Virginia,

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<sup>11</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 60-61.

<sup>12</sup>Francis Coleman Rosenberger (ed.), The Jefferson Reader: A Treasury of Writings About Thomas Jefferson (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953), p. 165.

<sup>13</sup>J. Lesslie Hall, "The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson," The Swanee Review, XXI (April, 1913), 167.

<sup>14</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 371.

<sup>15</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 371-374.

<sup>16</sup>Luebke, op. cit., pp. 351-353.



Jefferson stated that the priests had not promoted good in the world, but had made millions of innocent men and women to suffer; "roguery and error" had been spread "all over the earth" by each priest or preacher teaching a different dogma and all claiming to have the truth!<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, Jefferson considered the priesthood a detriment to the Christian religion.

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ levelled to every understanding and too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticism of Plato materials with which they might build up an artificial system, which might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for this order, and introduce it to profit, power and preeminence.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Jefferson saw the priesthood as an instrument of power and profit; the priests, not as servants of God, but only as profiteers and power seekers.

Jefferson further smote the priesthood in a letter to Charles Clay on January 29, 1815. The comments he made are most illuminating.

The genuine system of Jesus, and the artificial structures they have erected, to make them instruments of wealth, power, and preeminence to themselves, are as distinct things in my view as light and darkness . . .<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson viewed many "preachers of the gospel" as corruptors of the truth and charged them with adding dogmas which Jesus "never said nor saw."<sup>20</sup> Jefferson wrote that

They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the great Reformer [Jesus] of the vicious ethics and deism of the Jews, were He to return on earth, would not recognize one feature.

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<sup>17</sup>Jefferson, Notes, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>18</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 149.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 386.

To Jefferson, Christianity of that day was not true Christianity at all, because of the corruptions. It was only a distorted form of that religion.<sup>21</sup>

The condemnation Jefferson pronounced on clergy was not restricted to one sect; all came under his attack. Presbyterians as well as Jesuits were bombarded in his writings. All were described as being grasping, ambitious and tyrannical. Jefferson proposed never to let any form of tyranny dominate the mind of man, whether it be religious or political in nature.<sup>22</sup>

Jefferson believed that the progress of humanity had been hindered by priests and other clergy who were reluctant to accept scientific findings. Jefferson stated that the clergy caused man to look backward and not forward. As late as 1801 he expressed hopes the clergy would come to its senses and stop restricting learning.<sup>23</sup>

Jefferson looked forward to a time when the corruption in Christianity might be ended. He desired that the original purity and simplicity of Christianity be restored, stating that Jesus was a true friend, of liberty, science, and "the freest expansion of the human mind."<sup>24</sup>

The actual views Jefferson held on the clergy-dominated church government may have bearing here. One historical writer, William D. Gould, traced a change in Jefferson's views on church government. In 1776, Gould recorded, Jefferson had condemned an Episcopalian form of

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 175.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

church government in favor of a Presbyterian one, explaining that the latter was more compatible for men living under a republican form of government. He cautioned his fellow citizens that the bishops in England, under an Episcopalian type government, were the king's tools. In the early 1820's, Jefferson expressed vehement disapproval of the "revivalistic type of service" common to many Protestant groups, and told of his poor opinion of the numerous orthodox missionary societies.<sup>25</sup> He had obviously lost some enthusiasm for the Presbyterian church.

Not only was Jefferson adamant toward the institutional clergy-dominated church, but also toward those who were theologians within the church. Writing to his good friend John Adams, Jefferson expressed his dismay over a certain work on the Old Testament by a nineteenth-century scholar named Levi; Jefferson was concerned that Levi's work would cause only disputes among the church leaders and would accomplish no real good in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Jefferson would take to task any theologians with whom he specifically disagreed, including John Calvin. Jefferson whole-heartedly opposed Calvin's teachings on "total depravity." In essence, this doctrine proclaimed that an individual was totally incapable of acting in response to God until an operation of the Holy Spirit occurred in his life; that is, that man was incapable of doing good spiritually.<sup>27</sup> Jefferson strongly opposed such teaching, believing that man was not

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<sup>25</sup>William D. Gould, "The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XX (Sept. 1933), 198-199.

<sup>26</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 471.

<sup>27</sup>David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 24-25.



inherently evil. The only difference between Calvinism and paganism, Jefferson declared, was that Calvinism was "more unintelligible" than were pagan religions.<sup>28</sup> In a letter to John Adams, Jefferson told of his abhorrence of theological systems, and he severely attacked Calvin's religious position. Adams had questioned Jefferson, thinking that Jefferson might someday become a Calvinist. Jefferson had replied in his letter.

I can never join Calvin in addressing his God. He was indeed an atheist, which I can never be; or rather his religion was daemonism. If ever man worshipped a false God, he did. The Being described in his five points,<sup>29</sup> is not the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent Governor of the world; but a daemon of malignant spirit. It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all, than to blaspheme Him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin.<sup>30</sup>

Jefferson, in his later years, hoped for a return to primitive Christianity. He did state, however, that he must leave the work of restoring the early teachings to men younger than himself.<sup>31</sup>

Certain sects did receive Jefferson's praise, although the great majority of them were condemned by his words. As noted earlier, the body that was praiseworthy to Jefferson was the Quakers. In all of Jefferson's recorded writings surveyed, no condemnation of the Quakers can be detected, either for their beliefs or for their actions. It may be asserted, then, that Jefferson had some degree of admiration for this

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<sup>28</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 288.

<sup>29</sup>The "five points" referred to by Jefferson are the five basic tenants of Calvinism, Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Security of Believers. cf. Steele and Thomas.

<sup>30</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 425-426.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 391, to Benjamin Waterhouse, July 19, 1822.



religious group.<sup>32</sup>

Jefferson believed that all corruptions of Christ's doctrines had begun with the Apostle Paul. He denounced Paul as the chief corruptor of Christ's doctrines; apparently this kind of bitterness was directed toward subsequent church leaders for the greater part of Jefferson's life.<sup>33</sup> However, Jefferson was convinced that the unlettered Apostles, Apostolic Fathers, and Christians of the first century had lived under the guidance of the primitive teachings of Christ. From the time of Paul, Jefferson contended, through the subsequent century the pure doctrines of Christ became adulterated with teachings of Plato and other philosophers, and the result was the adherence to a corruption of the doctrines of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>34</sup>

Jefferson's many criticisms of religious sects did not go unnoticed by churchmen. On several occasions men from various denominations reproached Jefferson. In 1801 a scathing rebuke of Jefferson was printed in one of the eastern papers which was controlled by churchmen. Jefferson was unruffled by the article, stating, "I expect no mercy. They crucified their Saviour, who preached that their kingdom was not of this world; and all who practice on that precept must expect the extreme of their wrath."<sup>35</sup>

Edward Dowse, a colleague of Jefferson's, sent a sermon to Jefferson for his reading and requested that he reprint it. Jefferson's

<sup>32</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XII, pp. 346-347.

<sup>33</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 245.

<sup>34</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, p. 390.

<sup>35</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 275.

reply was that his printing of the sermon would be taken as a hypocritical action by many of the clergy, and that they would impugn his motives.

This is a resource which can never fail them [clergy], because there is no art, however virtuous, for which ingenuity may not find some bad motive . . . Every word which goes from me, whether verbally or in writing, becomes the subject of so much malignant distortion, and perverted construction, that I am obligated to caution my friends against admitting the possibility of my letters getting into the public papers, or a copy of them to be taken under any degree of confidence.<sup>36</sup>

John Mason, the famous New York preacher, wrote a pamphlet in 1800, "The Voice of Warning to Christians on the Ensuing Election." In this tract Mason warned the people to beware of Jefferson. "Christians: It is thus that a man [Jefferson] whom you are expected to elevate to the chief magistracy insults yourself and your Bible." Mason wrote this pamphlet after he had read Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, in which Jefferson had indicated doubt of the occurrence of the Noachian flood.<sup>37</sup>

Thomas Jefferson did not agree with much of organized religion. He had numerous criticisms of the sects and mistrusted the dedication of clergy. He did not believe he could conscientiously be affiliated with any one sect. In 1819 Jefferson wrote to Ezra Stiles, then President of Yale College, and stated that he was not a Calvinist nor was he a member of any sect he knew about. He wrote,

I am a sect by myself, as far as I know, I am not a Jew . . . I am, therefore, of His [Christ's] theology, believing that we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition . . . No doctrines of His lead to schism. It is the speculations of crazy theologians which have made a Babel of a religion the most moral and sublime ever preached to man, and calculated to heal, and

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 376-378.

<sup>37</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XII, p. XXIX. The editor inserts this as an example of clerical attacks upon Jefferson.

not to create differences. These religious animosities I impute to those who call themselves His ministers, and who engraft their casuistries on the stock of His simple precepts. I am sometimes more angry with them than is authorized by the blessed charities which He preaches.<sup>38</sup>

In view of Jefferson's voiced disdain for clergy and organized religion, and of the churchmen's dislike of Jefferson, the fact that Jefferson had dealings with several denominations and even contributed to them is somewhat surprising. Although he claimed to be "of his own sect," he went to worship services held by denominational groups. After his retirement to Monticello, Jefferson frequently attended the union meetings at the courthouse in Charlottesville, Virginia. For such meetings, Jefferson would ride to the square on horseback, remove a folding chair from his horse's pack, and sit listening to singing and preaching services. Jefferson described one of these meetings to Thomas Cooper in a letter dated November 2, 1822.

In our village of Charlottesville there is a good degree of religion, with a small spice of fanaticism. We have four sects, but without either church or meeting house. The courthouse is the common temple, one Sunday in the month to each. Here Episcopalian and Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist, meet together, join in hymning their Maker, listen with attention and devotion to each others's preachers and all mix in society with perfect harmony.<sup>39</sup>

One historian recorded a salutation by Jefferson to the Baptist Association in Connecticut. "I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem."<sup>40</sup> It would appear that Jefferson fraternized

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<sup>38</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 203-204.

<sup>39</sup>Bergh, op. cit., XV, p. 404. Cf. Foote, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>40</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XVI, page. 282.



with this group at least for some period of time. Another Jeffersonian writer stated that, "He [Jefferson] planned at least one church, contributed to the erection of others, gave freely to Bible Societies, and liberally to the support of the clergy. He attended church with normal regularity, taking his prayer book to the services and joining in the responses and prayers of the congregation. No human being ever heard him utter a word of profanity."<sup>41</sup>

From these examples cited, it would appear that Thomas Jefferson, staunch contender for the primitive teachings of Jesus, did not wholly repudiate the religious organizations of his day. While it has been established that he found great fault with the clergy, the dogmas, and the church government, he did much to aid these groups. His childhood ties had been to the Anglican Church, but Jefferson had long since refuted, to his own satisfaction, the teachings of that sect; his allegiance was not to any one sect, but he was interested in them all. In Jefferson's account book for the year 1824, he had recorded gifts to different denominations, "Episcopal church, two hundred dollars; a Presbyterian, sixty dollars; and a Baptist, twenty-five dollars."<sup>42</sup> Thomas Jefferson apparently believed that the religious sects of that time had some worth even though they were "perversions" or "adulterations" of Christ's church.

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<sup>41</sup>Claude G. Bowers, Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966), p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Foote, op. cit., p. 8.

## CHAPTER III

### JEFFERSONIAN THEOLOGY

Although Jefferson rejected most of the orthodox Christian beliefs, he did consider himself Christian. Careful investigation of Jefferson's writings and of works written about Jefferson reveals a fairly complete picture of his theology.<sup>1</sup> Jefferson's writings describe his concept of God, a God to whom he ascribed qualities and characteristics that could conform to his own personal interpretations of religion.

During the era in which Jefferson lived, reason was the accepted process for intellectual problem solving; the ability to reason was a respected quality.<sup>2</sup> Although Jefferson read widely the words of ancient philosophers, contemporary philosophers, and the Bible, the concept of God which he developed from his studies was further subjected to the test of reason. The theology that resulted was a mixture of those concepts that were reasonable. For Jefferson, the tangible, visible experiences of life were the ultimate tests for religious concepts.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson's concept that religious beliefs must be rational

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<sup>1</sup>By theology we mean his concept of God and the supernatural world. His theology changed negligibly over the years of his adulthood. Most of what is known of Jefferson's religion was written during the period between 1789 and 1826. These writings are Volumes 13 through 16 of the Writings of Thomas Jefferson as used in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Robert M. Healey, Jefferson on Religion in Public Education (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 76, 113.

considerations was partly influenced by Lord Bolingbroke, the English philosopher. Bolingbroke's adherence to the rational religion was based on intellect rather than on dogma.<sup>4</sup> Like Bolingbroke, Jefferson believed that problems in the area of religion must be reasoned out. Abstractive speculations and metaphysical thinking had as little appeal for him, as for Bolingbroke. Thus, insoluble problems were left unresolved, because life was too short and time too precious to be wasted on efforts to understand the universe.<sup>5</sup> Probably no contemporary thinker influenced Jefferson more than Bolingbroke. As late as 1821 Jefferson still preferred Bolingbroke's thinking to that of any other of the English philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Although Jefferson was not as extreme in his beliefs as Bolingbroke, he did display characteristics which were closely related to the deist conception of God held by Bolingbroke. The deist appeared from a seventeenth-century effort to find a standard of religious belief. Deism declared that miracles and revelation were accepted only by ignorant and unlearned men. Bolingbroke believed that the Christian religion, which embraced the Bible teachings of miracles and revelation, was merely a product of fraud, enthusiasm, and superstitions. Yet strangely enough, he accepted the basic Christian teachings concerning moral and ethical standards.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Rosenberg, op. cit., p. 162.

<sup>5</sup>Gilbert Chinard (ed.), The Literary Bible of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 305-306. Cf. Chinard, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>S. M. Jackson (ed.), The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963), III, 391-95.



Many of Jefferson's writings seem to express deistic opinions; yet Jefferson's theology was more than simply deistic.<sup>8</sup> He never referred to himself as a deist.<sup>9</sup> Deists developed a set of attributes for God that was compatible with their teachings; for the most part, deists minimized spiritual insight.<sup>10</sup> Deism was popular in Jefferson's South; many of the professional class rejected traditional Christianity for deistic beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Some of this group had great animosity toward the Christian beliefs. Thomas Paine was one American deist who attacked the Christian system. About Christianity, Paine said,

The Christian system of faith, including in it the whimsical account of the creation, the strange story of Eve, the snake and the apple, the ambiguous idea of a man-god; the mythological idea of a family of gods, and the Christian system of arithmetic that three is one and one is three.<sup>12</sup>

Jefferson, although in sympathy with some aspects of deism, did continue on to develop a separate, personal theology.<sup>13</sup> Jefferson rejected atheism as absurd. He stated,

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<sup>8</sup>Hall, op. cit., p. 172. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the father of Deism, outlined the basic tenets of deism in five areas.

1. There is one supreme God.
2. He is to be worshipped.
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.

<sup>9</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 199.

<sup>10</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>Morais, op. cit., pp. 152-155.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 21. Morais is quoting from Thomas Paine's Age of Reason, part 1, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup>Jefferson really followed no one system of theology; instead he developed a method over the years that might well be called Jeffersonian. Cf. Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 203-204.

And when the atheist descanted on the unceasing motion and circulation of matter through the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, never resting, never annihilated, always changing form, and under all forms gifted with the power of reproduction; the theist 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; urged the palpable 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 have ears; an answer obvious to the senses, as that of walking across the room, was to the philosopher demonstrating the non-existence of motion.<sup>14</sup>

Jefferson asserted that in the design of creation, solar, organic and human, lay the great argument for the existence of God.<sup>15</sup> This has been one of the classical arguments, through the ages, for the existence of God.<sup>16</sup> As for God's existence, Jefferson said,

It is impossible, I say, for the human mind not to believe, that there is in all this, design, cause and effect, up to an ultimate cause . . . So irresistible are these evidences of an intelligent and power Agent, that of the infinite numbers of men who have existed through all time, they have believed in the proportion of a million at least to a unit, in the hypothesis of an eternal pre-existence of a Creator, rather than in that of a self existent universe. Surely this unanimous sentiment renders this more probable, than that of a few in the other hypothesis.<sup>17</sup>

God was presented as the great Architect of the universe, with design being a witness to His existence. Jefferson accepted this premise, because it seemed logical that something as complex as the universe could only be explained as being made by God. The Design Argument for God's existence was generally accepted in Jefferson's day.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 469.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>William H. Davis, Philosophy of Religion (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1969), pp. 19-25.

<sup>17</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 469.

<sup>18</sup>Healey, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

Creation testified to the Great Creator.<sup>19</sup> To Jefferson, all of creation was alive with energy, and the diversity of the universe prompted him to quote from the Psalms, "O, Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches."<sup>20</sup> Jefferson saw all of physical creation, from the smallest to the greatest subject, as proclaiming the being of God.<sup>21</sup>

Jefferson contended that God spoke His creation, and that the earth and its inhabitants were not products of an evolutionary process.

I give one answer to all these theorists . . . They all suppose the earth a created existence. They must suppose a creator then; and that he possessed power and wisdom to a great degree. As he intended the earth for the habitation of animals and vegetables, is it reasonable to suppose, he made two jobs of his creation, that he first made a chaotic lump and set it into rotatory motion, and then waited the millions of ages necessary to form itself? That when it had done this, he stepped in a second time, to create the animals and plants which were to inhabit it? As the hand of a creator is to be called in, it may as well be called in at one stage of the process as another. We may as well suppose he created the earth at once, nearly in the state in which we see it, fit for the preservation of the beings he placed on it.<sup>22</sup>

Jefferson's theology included affirmation of the Biblical account of a six-day creation. The state of that creation was complete and not in need of evolving. Unlike many deists, Jefferson did not believe that God had merely created the universe and then left it alone to run like a giant machine, but instead he interpreted God's presence as a continued

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<sup>19</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 32. Psalms 104: 24.

<sup>21</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 139.

<sup>22</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, pp. 31, 40. Jefferson felt it useless to study geology, and therefore he did not plan it in the curriculum of the University of Virginia; only the location of certain minerals was studied. Boorstin viewed this curricular scheme as a result of Jefferson's ideas on creation, Lost World, p. 31.



action in a "superintendent" position.<sup>23</sup> Of God in such a capacity, Jefferson said,

[The] Fabricator of all things from matter and motion [is also] their Preserver and Regulator while permitted to exist in their present forms and their regeneration into new and other forms. We see, too, evident proofs of the necessity of a superintending power, to maintain the universe in its course and order. Stars, well known, have disappeared, new ones have come into view; comets, in their incalculable courses may run foul of suns and planets, and require renovation under other laws; certain races of animals are become extinct; and were there no restoring power, all existences might extinguish successively, one by one, until all should be reduced to a shapeless chaos.<sup>24</sup>

Jefferson believed that the nature of God, other than what is revealed in His creation, must remain unknowable to man. Twice he presented his idea that God was almost entirely unknown. In one of these writings he said,

. . . the benevolent and sublime reformer of that religion 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. And if we could all, after this example, leave the subject as undefinable, we should all be of one sect, doers of good, and eschewers of evil.<sup>25</sup>

As proof that man could know little of God, Jefferson cited the testimony of Jesus in the scriptures. "Of the nature of this Being we know nothing. Jesus tells us, that 'God is a Spirit.' John 4: 24."<sup>26</sup> Because Jefferson believed that God could be found only through nature or creation, he maintained reason must be the manner of research for the Creator.<sup>27</sup> Through rational means Jefferson found his God, and after finding Him, spoke to

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 427-428.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>27</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, p. 32.



Him in prayer. On various occasions Jefferson spoke of the efficacy of prayer. On one such occasion Jefferson said,

I offer my sincere prayers to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, that He may long preserve our country in freedom and prosperity, and to yourselves, Gentlemen, and the citizens of Columbia and its vicinity, the assurances of my profound consideration and respect.<sup>28</sup>

Jefferson prayed to his God, and trusted that God's goodness and mercy would assure providential care for him.<sup>29</sup>

Jefferson rejected the idea of a triune God.<sup>30</sup> It was mathematically impossible to have a concept of God as being one, yet with three different aspects, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup> In Jefferson's opinion, the doctrine of the Trinity was a disfigurement of the teachings of Jesus. Jefferson's logic could not accept the existence of such a personality as a triune God.<sup>32</sup> One of the principal New Testament passages pertaining to a discussion of the Trinity is John 1: 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jefferson interpreted this passage to mean only "reason" and not to describe a second member of the Godhead. Jefferson maintained that the original meaning had been misunderstood and that there was no "foundation in His [Christ's] genuine words" for a doctrine

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<sup>28</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 427. Cf. also XV, p. 237; III, p. 323; V, p. 444.

<sup>30</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, p. 378.

<sup>31</sup>A detailed explanation is prohibited by space; see The New Bible Dictionary, edited by J. D. Douglas for a complete article on the Trinity.

<sup>32</sup>Healey, op. cit., pp. 107-108.

of Trinity.<sup>33</sup> He stated:

No historical fact is better established, than that the doctrine of one God, pure and uncompounded, was that of the early ages of Christianity; and was among the efficacious doctrines which gave it triumph over the polytheism of the ancients, sickened with the absurdities of their own theology.<sup>34</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity was established not from the teachings of Jesus but from a distortion of his words. Jefferson believed that:

When we shall have done away with 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.<sup>35</sup>

He considered the Trinity to be a result of the corrupted Christian church, brought on by priests and other clergy who sought to bring mysticism into Christ's religion. He believed that there was great danger in allowing Trinitarianism to continue unchallenged.<sup>36</sup>

The theological writings that possibly impressed Jefferson most of all were the words of Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian minister. Priestly's History of the Corruptions of Christianity and A History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ led Jefferson toward the Unitarian movement.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 429-430. It should be noted that Jefferson misunderstood the technical use of "the Word" as used in John's gospel. See William Barclay, More New Testament Words (London: SCM Press, 1958), pp. 106-116.

<sup>34</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 408.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>36</sup>Healey, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>37</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 199. Jefferson believed in the tenets of the Unitarian faith, which deny the doctrine of the Trinity, reject the divinity of Jesus, and hold that God is a single being.

Editors of Jefferson's Writings suggest that Jefferson deserved a place in the conservative Unitarian camp.<sup>38</sup> Jefferson's own statements indicate this was probably true. To Dr. Thomas Cooper, a professor of Unitarian theology, Jefferson wrote that he desired that the Unitarian movement spread from North to South.

The diffusion of instruction, to which there is now so growing an attention, will be the remote remedy to this fever of fanaticism; while the proximate one will be the progress of Unitarianism. That this will, ere long, be the religion of the majority from North to South, I have no doubt.<sup>39</sup>

Jefferson hoped that eventually the Unitarians from Cambridge would be accepted as those of "the tritheistical school."<sup>40</sup> He expressed hopes that Unitarianism "become the general religion of the United States."<sup>41</sup> The spread of his own unitarianism would restore the primitive teachings of Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

Although Jefferson rejected the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus held a prominent position in Jefferson's thinking. As stated earlier, the supernatural character of Christ being God's Son was not acceptable to Jefferson. The supernaturalism of the God-man was dismissed as untrue because it did not fit into Jefferson's rational religion.<sup>43</sup> Jefferson called for humanization of Jesus, and stressed

<sup>38</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. iv.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 403, 405, 408.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>42</sup>Adrienne Koch, The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson (Gloucester: Peter Smith & Co., 1957), p. 26.

<sup>43</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, pp. 260-261.



that he must be understood as a man who excelled in integrity.<sup>44</sup> In Jesus, Jefferson saw the qualities of the eighteenth-century man which Jefferson hoped to develop; but he did not see a divine being.<sup>45</sup>

To the Virginian, Christ was the great reformer of the Jewish nation;<sup>46</sup> Jesus had reformed the harsh law of Moses by superseding it with one of much greater value.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of his reformation of Jewish religious custom, Christ had brought into being a great religion. Jefferson stated unequivocally that the teachings of Christ were the greatest of any philosopher. He believed that Jesus had outstripped them all in theology, philosophy, and ethics.<sup>48</sup> He easily surpassed any of the ancients in teachings.<sup>49</sup> In one of the clearest of declarations, Jefferson revealed his belief that Jesus Christ was the greatest of the ancients whose

. . . philosophy went chiefly to the government of our passions, so far as respected ourselves, and the procuring our own tranquillity. In our duties to others they were short and deficient. 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. They confined themselves to actions; he pressed his sentiments into the region of our thoughts, and called for purity at the fountainhead.<sup>50</sup>

In a similar vein, Jefferson said of the teachers of times past,

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<sup>44</sup>Koch, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>45</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, pp. 157-159.

<sup>46</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 243.

<sup>47</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, pp. 388-389.

<sup>48</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 385.

<sup>49</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 375; XIV, p. 385.

<sup>50</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 371.



In developing our duties to others, they were short and defective. They embraced, indeed, the circles of kindred and friends, and inculcated patriotism, or the love of our country in the aggregate, as a primary obligation; towards our neighbors and countrymen they taught justice, but scarcely viewed them as within the circle of benevolence. Still less have they inculcated peace, charity and love to our fellow men, or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the years Jefferson maintained his esteem for the teachings of Jesus. He once mentioned two venerable teachers of ancient times in connection with the man of Nazareth: "Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves; Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others."<sup>52</sup>

Jefferson no doubt believed that his opinion of the quality of Christ's teachings had been acquired by means of objective logical thinking. Jefferson had studied the evidence, and, not by emotion but by logical research, had determined that Jesus' words had superior ethics, standards, and value.<sup>53</sup> Because of his devout faith in Christ, Jefferson called himself Christian. He said, "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."<sup>54</sup> Several times in his writings Jefferson referred to the "sublime" and "pure" system of morals that Christ taught. A high moral standard was important to Jefferson. "Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern, which have come under

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>52</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 220.

<sup>53</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, p. 260, "The results of a life time" of study according to Jefferson in Writings, X, p. 379.

<sup>54</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 389; statement to this same effect found in: XIV, p. 385; XV, p. 203. Jefferson believed that to be a Christian was not to become part of some institutionalized church.

my observation, none appear to me so pure as that of Jesus."<sup>55</sup>

Jefferson, after studying the teachings of Jesus, summed up the instruction in three precepts:

1. "That there is only one God, and He all perfect."
2. "That there is a future state of rewards and punishment."
3. "That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion."

For Jefferson, this was Christianity as taught by its founder. Jefferson believed strongly that a Christian was not one who merely followed a certain doctrine but was one who followed the teachings of Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

While Jefferson rejected the Sonship of Christ, his miracles, and other supernatural characteristics or events in his life, he accepted Christ as a great religious teacher. Jefferson, using his reasoning ability, had critically examined the New Testament and was convinced that he had learned what the authentic teachings of Christ were. He believed that, as Plato had placed his words in the mouth of Socrates, so had the gospel writers placed their own words in the mouth of Christ.<sup>57</sup> The actual words must be culled out from the gospel writers' words; only then could Jesus' true teachings be known.<sup>58</sup> Jefferson asserted that there were two gospels in the New Testament--one about Christ and one of Christ. He advised that one must discriminately study, separate the two, and find

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<sup>55</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, pp. 377-378; also XII, p. 345; XIV, pp. 385-386; and X, p. 374.

<sup>56</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 384.

<sup>57</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 259.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

Christ's message.<sup>59</sup> Speaking of the writings of Jesus' biographers as compared to the truth, Jefferson said,

. . . and as separable from that as the diamond from the dunghill, we have the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man; outlines which it is lamentable He did not live to fill up.<sup>60</sup>

Jefferson also spoke of the differences in the Biblical texts regarding Jesus.

Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others, again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to Him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others, of His disciples.<sup>61</sup>

Jefferson had described his method for interpretation; he simply disregarded those writings which seemed to be contradictory to his ideas of Jesus, and those which were words of Christ's disciples.<sup>62</sup>

A product of Jefferson's work in researching the gospels is a book which has come to be known as the Jefferson Bible. Jefferson began the writing in 1804 and worked periodically on it until its completion in 1819.<sup>63</sup> He later had the volume bound in red leather and stamped Morals of Jesus. The original was passed down through the Jefferson

<sup>59</sup>O. I. A. Roche (ed.), The Jefferson Bible (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1964), p. 9.

<sup>60</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 220.

<sup>61</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 224-245, written to William Short, April 13, 1820.

<sup>62</sup>Interestingly enough this is the nineteenth and twentieth century method of interpreting much of the New Testament. Cf. Donald Guthrie, A Short Life of Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 30-50.

<sup>63</sup>Foote, op. cit., p. 61.



family until it was presented to the National Museum in Washington.<sup>64</sup>

Jefferson's first title for his work was The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth: extracted from the account of His life and teachings as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Being an abridgement of the New Testament for use of the Indians, unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond their comprehension.<sup>65</sup> Jefferson later reduced the title to The Life and Morals of Jesus.<sup>66</sup>

Before Jefferson began the work, he attempted to persuade his Unitarian preacher friend, Joseph Priestly, to undertake such a writing. Priestly did not wish to begin the task, so Jefferson began writing in 1804, while serving as President.<sup>67</sup> The first draft had only the English accounts; later he added Greek, Latin and French accounts to his book, arranged with the English accounts in four parallel columns across each page.<sup>68</sup>

Although Jefferson had intended the book for use by the Indians, they did not use it. Instead, he began to use the volume for his own personal devotions.<sup>69</sup> He often read the book before retiring in the evening.<sup>70</sup>

Jefferson referred to his method of compiling the book in a letter

<sup>64</sup>Roche, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>69</sup>Edgar J. Goodspeed, "Thomas Jefferson and the Bible," Harvard Theological Review, XL (April, 1947), p. 76.

<sup>70</sup>Roche, op. cit., p. 23.



to Charles Thomas on January 9, 1816.

I . . . made a wee-little book from the same materials, which I call the Philosophy of Jesus; it is a paradigma of His doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject.<sup>71</sup>

As for portions of the scripture which he included:

I made for my own satisfaction, an extract from the Evangelists of His morals, selecting those only whose style and spirit proved them genuine, and His own; and they are as distinguishable from the matter in which they are embedded as diamonds in dunghills.<sup>72</sup>

In 1904 the Government Printing Office made some 9000 copies for use by the Congress. The Jefferson Bible went through several editions and was made available to the public.<sup>73</sup>

The arrangement and contents of the Jefferson Bible is interesting indeed. There is no reference to any event in Jesus' life that would indicate his divinity. His miraculous birth, miracles, or resurrection from the dead were not included nor mentioned in any way. The greater portion of Jefferson's book dealt with moral precepts.<sup>74</sup> Jefferson relied heavily upon scriptures from the book of Matthew for his selections, choosing passages from Luke with somewhat less frequency. Jefferson's inclusions from John and Mark were of about equal number, but writings from these were selected only half as often as were the writings of Matthew and Luke.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 385.

<sup>72</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, p. 390. Letter to Isaac McPherson dated September 18, 1813. Jefferson felt it was quite a simple matter to distinguish the true sayings of Jesus from those that were only embellishment by the writers. See also XV, p. 259.

<sup>73</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XX, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup>See Appendix A, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup>See Appendix B, p. 63.

Jefferson's laborious efforts to produce his own New Testament indicate that he was certainly not satisfied with the Bible with all its embellishments, i.e., supernatural events, and in need of revision.<sup>76</sup> His study of Bolingbroke may have caused him to question the authenticity of the scriptures.<sup>77</sup> He once advised a young man to "read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus."<sup>78</sup> Jefferson did not believe the Bible to be a divine book that one should hold in awe; instead he considered it a book of history like any other, to be read with a critical eye.

For dispute as long as we will on religious tenets, our reason at last must ultimately decide, as it is the only oracle which God has given us to determine between what really comes from Him and the phantasms of a disordered or deluded imagination.<sup>79</sup>

As history, the Bible was to be accepted only where it did not countermand reason or go against natural occurrences.<sup>80</sup>

While Jefferson believed that the Old Testament text was "defective and doubtful,"<sup>81</sup> some of his most lucid observations regarding religion were included in a letter to General Alexander Smyth in which he discussed the New Testament book of Revelation and denied the authenticity and antiquity of the scriptures. He wrote that he believed the Bible to be a product of the second century and therefore post-apostolic. He also asserted that the Bible was unintelligible and reasoned that God

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<sup>76</sup>Hall, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>77</sup>Chenard, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>78</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, p. 258.

<sup>79</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XVI, p. 197.

<sup>80</sup>Healey, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>81</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 71.

could not have inspired such a work because He would never have inspired that which man could not understand. Jefferson dismissed the Bible's authority, declaring that it was not genuinely from God.<sup>82</sup> It may be noted here that Jefferson's attitude toward the scriptures may have been shaded because of his familiarity with the theological controversies in Germany over the matter of Biblical inspiration and authority.<sup>83</sup> Tübingen University in Germany was deeply involved in this heated discussion of Biblical inspiration. The Tübingen faculty led by F. C. Baur considered very few books of the Bible to be given by God; those books that did escape criticism at this point were designated as having been written in a different era than had been assigned previously.<sup>84</sup>

Despite Jefferson's conviction that the Bible was not inspired of God and therefore infallible, he did feel the book had merit. He was interested in many passages of the Bible and was an avid reader of both the Old and New Testaments. Jefferson took comfort in the words of the scriptures and believed they provided comfort for others. Being informed of a shortage of Bibles in Virginia, Jefferson once gave some fifty dollars to have copies printed for some of the families of Virginia.<sup>85</sup>

Jefferson studied his scriptures in Greek as well as English. He read Greek and owned eleven Greek New Testaments. Jefferson maintained that it was necessary to read the message in the original in order

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<sup>82</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XVI, pp. 100-101. Cf. XV, p. 261.

<sup>83</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIII, p. 320.

<sup>84</sup>J. D. Douglas (ed.), The New Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 152-153.

<sup>85</sup>Gould, op. cit., pp. 203-205.



to gain a knowledge of what was said.<sup>86</sup> Jefferson did not believe that special revelation was necessary for one to find God. He felt certain that one could find the Creator by means other than reading the Scriptures as accepted by orthodox Christianity.<sup>87</sup> He said,

Now one-sixth of mankind only are supposed to be Christians; the other five-sixths then, who do not believe in the Jewish and Christian revelation, are without a knowledge of the existence of a God!<sup>88</sup>

He felt that whatever could not be reasoned out or plainly demonstrated was not of great value.<sup>89</sup>

As has been stated earlier, Jefferson did not accept miracles.<sup>90</sup> Just as he could not believe in the divine inspiration of the scripture, Jefferson thought miracles were totally irrational.<sup>91</sup> Two excerpts from Jefferson's writings suffice to sum up his disdain for the belief in miracles. In one he said,

But those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from God. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change in the laws of nature, in the case he relates. For example, in the book of Joshua, we are told, the sun stood still several hours. Were we to read that fact in Livy or Tacitus, we should class it with their showers of blood, speaking of statues, beasts, etc. But it is said, that the writer of that book was inspired. Examine, therefore, candidly, what evidence

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<sup>86</sup>Roche, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>87</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>88</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 426.

<sup>89</sup>Healey, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 102. Healey points out that Jefferson accepted the creation by God because he felt it was rational and scientifically plausible.



there is of his having been inspired. The pretension is entitled to your inquiry, because millions believe it. On the other hand, you are astronomer enough to know how contrary it is to the law of nature that a body revolving on its axis, as the earth does, should have stopped, should not, by that sudden stoppage, have prostrated animals, trees, buildings, and should after a certain time have resumed its revolutions . . .<sup>92</sup>

In the second, he spoke of the belief in miracles that would end and would be classified as fables. He stated,

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. But we may hope that the dawn of reason, and freedom of thought in these United States, will do away all this artificial scaffolding, and restore to us the primitive and genuine doctrines of this the most venerated Reformer of human errors.<sup>93</sup>

Certainly there was no room in Jeffersonian theology for any event slightly resembling a miracle.

One aspect of traditional Christianity that Jefferson accepted as truth was belief in an afterlife.<sup>94</sup> Jefferson did not attempt to learn about the existence of a life after death; he simply said he would "trust for the future to Him who has been so good for the past."<sup>95</sup> Apparently Jefferson's main assumptions regarding eternal life were that the second life would be a spiritual existence and that it would be a better life than one on the earth.<sup>96</sup> In 1818, on the death of Mrs. John Adams, Jefferson wrote to Adams,

. . . it is some comfort to us both, that the term is not very distant, at which we are to deposit in the same ceremont, our sorrows and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an

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<sup>92</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 220.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 430.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>95</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 299.

<sup>96</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, 11; also XVIII, p. 310.

ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved and lost, and whom we shall still love and never lose again.<sup>97</sup>

Jefferson almost described what existence in the afterlife would be like when he wrote concerning Jesus' materialism. He expressed his belief that man was a whole being, without separation of flesh and spirit, ideas and reality.<sup>98</sup>

. . . we can have no evidence of any existence which impresses no sense. Of this opinion were most of the ancient philosophers, and several of the early and orthodox fathers of the Christian church. Indeed, Jesus Himself, the Founder of our religion, was unquestionably a Materialist as to man. In all His doctrines of the resurrection, He teaches expressly that the body is to rise in substance. In the Apostles' Creed, we all declare that we believe in the 'resurrection of the body.' Jesus said that God is Spirit without defining it.<sup>99</sup>

Further explaining his concepts regarding the spirit and materialism, Jefferson said,

When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. 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: but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by the Lockes, the Tracys and the Stewarts. At what age of the Christian church this heresy of immaterialism, or masked atheism, crept in, I do not exactly 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 generally, of the three first centuries, held it to be matter, light and thin indeed, an ethereal gas; but still matter.

Jefferson, of necessity, believed that the body and spirit were one, and that the whole being would be present for the second life. To believe in a spiritual character that had no visible substance would have caused Jefferson to overlook his system of reason.

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>98</sup>Lehmann, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>99</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, pp. 274-275; also pp. 266, 244.

The Virginian regarded religion as a highly personal, private matter; he maintained that religion should be discussed only among friends, and never as a public issue.<sup>100</sup> Once when Jefferson stopped for the night at Ford's Tavern in Virginia, he engaged in conversation with a preacher. The next morning the preacher asked the innkeeper of what persuasion Jefferson was, thinking him to be another minister. The innkeeper replied that the man was Thomas Jefferson. Astonished at this information, the preacher explained that Jefferson was the most religious person he had ever met.<sup>101</sup> This incident helps to describe the depth of Jefferson's religious convictions and also indicates how Jefferson preferred to keep religion a matter of private discussion. Because Jefferson did not publicly display his religion, he wrote comparatively little about his religious beliefs even though he wrote some ten to fifteen thousand letters each year.<sup>102</sup> Many considered Jefferson aloof in his personal approach because he desired to keep his religion a private matter. Jefferson's own words were, "Say nothing . . ."<sup>103</sup> On April 21, 1803, Jefferson wrote of his aversion to religious publicity to the eminent Dr. Benjamin Rush.

I am moreover averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public; because it would countenance the presumption of those who have endeavored to draw them before that tribunal, and to reduce public opinion to erect itself into that inquisition over the rights of conscience, which the laws have so justly proscribed. It behooves every man who values liberty of conscience

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<sup>100</sup>Elbert D. Thomas, Thomas Jefferson: World Citizen (New York: Modern Ages Books, 1942), p. 41.

<sup>101</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 197. Gould is quoting from Henry S. Randall, one of Jefferson's early biographers, op. cit.

<sup>102</sup>Jefferson, Writings, V, p. ix.

<sup>103</sup>Padover, op. cit., p. 288.



for himself, to resist invasions of it in the case of others; or their case may, by change of circumstances, become his own. It behooves him, too, in his own case, to give no example of concession, betraying the common right of independent opinion, by answering questions of faith, which the laws have left between God and himself.<sup>104</sup>

Jefferson disclosed here his viewpoint of man's right to preserve his private religious beliefs.

Jeffersonian theology was a complex of theological principles adapted by Jefferson from Biblical studies and works of ancient and contemporary philosophers within the confines of reason. Jefferson believed that the Supreme Creator, God, had made the universe, a reasonable assumption to him because he said the design of nature testified to its originator. Jefferson was convinced that high moral standards, as taught by Jesus, were mandatory for those who would follow Christ. He asserted that, while Jesus of Nazareth was the master preceptor and adversary of evil, the Christ was not divine, was not a god-man. Thomas Jefferson rejected the records of miraculous happenings written in the gospels, as he rejected all of the supernatural qualities attributed to Jesus or his disciples, on the basis of reason. Jefferson was a very religious man, obviously capable of deep spiritual thoughts; a man who was so intensely interested in the teachings of Jesus that he wrote his own version of the Bible. He believed that religion was an individual matter for each man to decide.

Jefferson's actions, during his educative years, in public and private life were influenced and guided by his theology. His moral and ethical standards were infused into the life and efforts of Thomas Jefferson.

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<sup>104</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, pp. 380-381.

## CHAPTER IV

### RELIGIOUS MORALITY: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

In view of the information presented earlier, it may be concluded that Jefferson's religion emphasized lofty moral standards more than spirituality or spiritual character. His writings reflect this heavy stress on morality. Jefferson believed that life was not a struggle between good and evil but simply a task to be performed to one's highest capability.<sup>1</sup> To Jefferson, arguments about theology were useless; he perceived the chief purpose of religious teachings to be to uplift the moral standards of people.<sup>2</sup> In 1809 Jefferson admitted that his religious outlook was largely confined to moral teachings.<sup>3</sup> At one point Jefferson stated the results of his religious study were to "Be just and good."<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson believed that all men had been created by God, and in all areas, including morality, were equal.<sup>5</sup> It was Jefferson's opinion that all men had three basic qualities given them by the Creator; these attributes were reason, capacity for education, and morality.<sup>6</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 162-163.

<sup>3</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XII, p. 236.

<sup>4</sup>Adams, op. cit., p. 357.

<sup>5</sup>Healey, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, p. 261.

described morality as "the brightest gem with which the human character is studded."<sup>7</sup> All men possessed this precious attribute, and ethereal standards of morality could be developed among humanity. One could overcome selfishness by education, instruction or restraint, and after selfishness had been eradicated from one's life, virtue would take hold of one's character.<sup>8</sup> Jefferson also believed that a well-informed man could form just opinions, and that he would act fairly; he said that the instructed man would choose the greater good because of a God-given quality within him.<sup>9</sup> Referring to acts of morality,

These good acts give us pleasure, but how happens it that they give us pleasure? Because nature hath implanted in our habits a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistably to feel and to succor their distresses . . . The Creator would indeed have been a bungling artist, had He intended man for a social animal, without planting in him social dispositions. It is true they are not planted in every man, because there is no rule without exceptions; but it is false reasoning which converts exceptions into general rules. Some men are born without the organs of sight, or of hearing, or without hands. Yet it would be wrong to say that man is born without these faculties . . .<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson, then, believed that man had inherent qualities of good that guided individuals to a "sense of duty" to others. He apparently thought that this inward drive for good was a strong force, "which prompts us irresistably to feel and succor their distresses . . ."<sup>11</sup> He declared that morality was a part of man, just as were his arms and legs. "It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of

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<sup>7</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 143.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> Foote, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson, Writings, XIV, pp. 141-142.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 141.



members is given to them in a greater or lesser degree."<sup>12</sup> To those critics who argued that not all men were created moral creatures, Jefferson presented the following arguments:

Some have argued against the existence of a moral sense, by saying that if nature had given us such a sense, impelling us to virtuous actions, and warning us against those which are vicious, then nature would also have designated, by some particular ear-marks, the two sets of actions which are, in themselves, the one virtuous and the other vicious. Whereas, we find, in fact, that the same actions are deemed virtuous in one country and vicious in another. The answer is, that nature has constituted utility to man, the standard and test of virtue. Men living in different countries, under different circumstances, different habits and regimens, may have different utilities; the same act, therefore, may be useful, and consequently virtuous in one country which is injurious and vicious in another differently circumstanced.<sup>13</sup>

Jefferson stated that, while man could escape temporarily from guilt, disappointment and failure through wine, alcohol or opium, man must follow morality as taught by Jesus to have enduring peace of mind.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps one reason for Jefferson's ready acceptance of Jesus' morality was that Jefferson felt that Jesus' teachings produced the greatest good, and this was the zenith of efforts.<sup>15</sup>

Jefferson believed that society should be improved by religion, focusing on morality.

Reading, reflection and time have convinced me that the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree, (for all forbid us to murder, steal, plunder, or bear false witness), and that we should not intermeddle with the particular dogmas in which all religions differ, and which are totally unconnected with morality. In all of them we see good men, and as many in one as another. The varieties in the structure and action of the human mind as in

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<sup>12</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, p. 257.

<sup>13</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 143.

<sup>14</sup>Boorstin, Lost World, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 198.

those of the body, are the work of our Creator, against which it cannot be a religious duty to erect the standard of uniformity. The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, he has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain.<sup>16</sup>

Here Jefferson suggested that society should and would benefit from moral practices. Nations that break the moral codes should not be dealt with, but should be left alone.<sup>17</sup> Jefferson felt that the country required a strong moral force to sustain its very existence.

Jefferson's skepticism of organized religion and his theology in general lead him to mold religion into a means of developing personal morality. He believed that God had implanted a moral sense in man at creation. He concluded that morality was essential to the well-being of society.

Because Jefferson's approach to religion principally was one of morality, he demanded that all denominations and groups have the right of religious freedom. He stated, "I am for freedom of religion and against all manoeuvres [sic] to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another."<sup>18</sup> From his early adulthood, Jefferson had spoken in favor of religious freedom<sup>19</sup> and had worked toward making that freedom a reality. Jefferson was completely convinced that religion was a private matter and not to be an area governed by the State. He described his support for a separation of Church and State in a letter to the Danburg Baptist Association.

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<sup>16</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XII, p. 315.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>18</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup>Jefferson, Writings, VI, pp. 425-426.

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. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.<sup>20</sup>

In some notes on religious freedom Jefferson stated his belief somewhat more forcefully:

The care of every man's soul belongs to himself. But what if he neglect the care of it? Well, what if he neglect the care of his health or estate, which more nearly relate to the state? Will the magistrate make a law that he shall not be poor or sick? Laws provide against injury from others, but not from ourselves. God himself will not save men against their wills . . . No man has power to let another prescribe his faith. Faith is not faith without believing. No man can conform his faith to the dictates of another. The life and essence of religion consist in the internal persuasion or belief of the mind . . . Compulsion in religion is distinguished peculiarly from compulsion in every other thing. I may grow rich by an art I am compelled to follow, I may recover health by medicine I am compelled to take . . . but I cannot be saved by a worship I disbelieve.<sup>21</sup>

A "cannibal" clergy and the "loathsome combination of Church and State" called for desperate measures.<sup>22</sup> The solution, as Jefferson perceived it, was to effect the disestablishment of the state church. In this way, the God-given freedom to worship or not worship as an individual might choose would be assured.<sup>23</sup> Jefferson later expressed his views on the

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<sup>20</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XVI, pp. 281-282.

<sup>21</sup>Adams, op. cit., p. 113. Adams quotes this passage by Jefferson.

<sup>22</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XIV, p. 280.

<sup>23</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XVI, pp. 319-320.



subject in a letter to the General Meeting of Baptist Association in Chesterfield, Virginia on November 21, 1808.

We have solved by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government, and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving every one to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the induction of his own reason, and the serious convictions of his own inquiries.<sup>24</sup>

In one of his most famous remarks Jefferson denounced the state church as being against his concept of "natural rights" as given by God. "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."<sup>25</sup> Jefferson's desire to sever the bond between Church and State was founded on his intense beliefs that man must be free and must be able to worship God in freedom.

Not only did Jefferson speak against the state church concept, but he acted to enforce his ideas of religious freedom. His Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia was a milestone in American religious history. Before the passage of the bill in 1786, a heretic could, according to common law, be burned at the stake.<sup>26</sup> In 1705, a Virginia law had been passed that was designed to curb religious heresy. Jefferson described this law in Notes on the State of Virginia:

. . . if a person brought up in the Christian religion denies the being of a God, or the Trinity, or asserts there are more Gods than one, or denies the Christian religion to be true, or the scriptures to be of divine authority, he is punishable on the first offence by incapacity to hold any office or employment ecclesiastical, civil, or military; on the second by disability to sue, to take any gift or legacy, to be guardian, executor,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 320-321.

<sup>25</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 174. Letter written to Dr. Benjamin Rush on September 23, 1800.

<sup>26</sup>Bowers, op. cit., p. 104.

or administrator, and by three years imprisonment, without bail. A father's right to the custody of his own children being founded in law on his right of guardianship, this being taken away, they may of course be severed from him, and put, by the authority of a court, into more orthodox hands. This is a summary view of that religious slavery, under which a people have been willing to remain, who have lavished their lives and fortunes for the establishment of their civil freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Jefferson maintained that the "religious slavery" which the people had allowed to exist was incongruous to the political freedom which the Declaration of Independence cited.<sup>28</sup> They must be as religiously free as they proclaimed themselves politically. Jefferson's wall of separation between Church and State was to give real meaning to his convictions.<sup>29</sup> His bill for freedom of religion enacted four measures:

. . . no man shall (1) be compelled by the government to attend or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor (2) be punished or interfered with by the government on account of his religious opinions or beliefs, but (on the contrary) all men shall be free (so far as the government is concerned) (3) to profess and argue for his religious opinions and beliefs, and (4) such activity shall in no way affect his civil capacities.<sup>30</sup>

To accomplish these goals, Jefferson had had to surmount tremendous obstacles.<sup>31</sup> The statute set a standard of religious freedom far more complete than any known in the North American states except Rhode Island.<sup>32</sup> With this statute, Jefferson's philosophy was brought into practical reality. However, the bill was not approved in Virginia at

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<sup>27</sup>Jefferson, Notes, pp. 158-159.

<sup>28</sup>Leonard W. Levy, Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup>J. M. O'Neill, Religion and Education under the Constitution (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), pp. 4-6.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 25.

the time of its first inception in 1779. It was not finally adopted until 1786. The radical concepts in the bill had been too new for Jefferson's contemporaries to accept at first; several years had to pass before they were rendered sufficiently acceptable.<sup>33</sup>

Not only did Jefferson believe that Church and State should be separate, he believed that state schools should not teach religion. Jefferson attempted to persuade the administrators of William and Mary College to cease religious instruction, but he could not convince them that the plan was a good one. His proposal had been to replace the faculty of theology with a professorship of "moral philosophy" along with a department of "civil" and "ecclesiastical" history. The measure had met strenuous opposition from the Anglican Church and finally the matter had been dropped. Jefferson then proposed the establishment of Albermarle Academy, an institution that would have the various qualities he had hoped to see in William and Mary College.<sup>34</sup> From this beginning, Jefferson worked toward the establishment of his University of Virginia at Richmond.

When the University had been established, Jefferson wrote to his good friend Thomas Cooper regarding the absence of a theology faculty. In the letter, dated November 2, 1822, Jefferson outlined his reasons for opposing the teaching of religion in a tax-supported institution.

In our university you know there is no Professorship of Divinity . . . In our annual report to the legislature, after stating the constitutional reasons against a public establishment of any religious instruction, we suggest the expediency of encouraging the different religious sects to establish, each for itself, a professorship of

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<sup>33</sup>Thomas Fleming, The Man From Monticello (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1969), p. 81.

<sup>34</sup>Levy, op. cit., pp. 10-11.



their own tenets, on the confines of the university, so near that their students may attend the lectures there, and have the free use of our library, and every other accommodation we can give them; preserving, however, their independence of us and of each other. [He hoped this would] soften their asperities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality.<sup>35</sup>

The alternative to teaching religion in the University proposed by Jefferson was what is now known as a Bible Chair.<sup>36</sup> Each denomination would have religious instruction provided; the University would give credit for such courses, but the tax-supported school would not be providing salaries for teachers of religion. Thus Jefferson was able to bring the new system into the program of the University of Virginia. The program was acceptable to Jefferson because it did not interfere with his convictions regarding freedom and tolerance, concepts which were integral parts of his philosophy of God and religion.

During Jefferson's tenure as President of the United States, he found it impossible to proclaim Thanksgiving a holiday. To him, this would have been infringing upon the authority of an individual to exercise his freedom of religion. Since Jefferson believed this, he thought it unconstitutional to declare a religious holiday.<sup>37</sup> In a letter written January 1, 1802, to Levi Lincoln, his Attorney General, Jefferson said,

Averse to receive addresses, yet unable to prevent them, I have generally endeavored to turn them to some account, by making them the occasion, by way of answer, of sowing useful truths and principles among the people, which might germinate and become rooted among their political tenets. The Baptist address, now enclosed,

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<sup>35</sup>Jefferson, Writings, XV, p. 405; XIV, p. 200.

<sup>36</sup>William S. Banowsky, The Mirror of a Movement (Dallas: Christian Publishing Co., 1965), p. 359.

<sup>37</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 216.

admits of a condemnation of the alliance between Church and State, under the authority of the Constitution. It furnishes an occasion, too, which I have long wished to find, of saying why I do not proclaim fastings and thanksgivings, as my predecessors did. The address, to be sure, does not point at this, and its introduction is awkward. But I foresee no opportunity of doing it more pertinently. I know it will give great offence to the New England clergy; but the advocate of religious freedom is to expect neither peace nor forgiveness from them. Will you be so good as to examine the answer, and suggest any alterations which might prevent an ill effect, or promote a good one, among the people? You understand the temper of those in the North, and can weaken it, therefore, to their stomachs: it is at present seasoned to the Southern taste only. I would ask the favor of you to return it, with the address, in the course of the day or evening. Health and affection.<sup>38</sup>

Jefferson was to present his reasons for declining to declare religious holidays, then, in a public way. He realized that some ill feelings could result from the New England clergy but he could not compromise.

Thomas Jefferson desired that he be remembered in history for three accomplishments, and these contributions to society are listed on the tombstone on Jefferson's grave. He wanted to be remembered for his authorship of the Declaration of Independence, for presentation of the Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia, and for the establishment of the University of Virginia.<sup>39</sup> While there are many other achievements of Jefferson proclaimed by history, these three are certainly among the key ones.

Those principles found in Jeffersonian theology, God-given rights of freedom and "natural rights" as Jefferson phrased it, were successfully incorporated in the American system. After the Bill of Religious Freedom was adopted in Virginia, other states followed the example. Jefferson had worked diligently to separate Church and State, and he accomplished

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<sup>38</sup>Jefferson, Writings, X, p. 305.

<sup>39</sup>James Truslow Adams, Jeffersonian Principles and Hamiltonian Principles (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1932), p. 161.

his task. He established the University of Virginia, without the inclusion of a religion faculty, and set up his new program, the Bible Chair. The precedent set by Jefferson in the University of Virginia has been imitated through the years, and today state universities and colleges in America almost universally follow this example.



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Thomas Jefferson was brought up in an Anglican home, and Anglicanism was the closest contact Jefferson had with any form of organized religion. As a boy he was educated by the Anglican clergy and for a time, he, along with his father, served as vestrymen in their local church. Little else is known of his early religious training or affiliation with other churches.

During Jefferson's college years his religious convictions began to change. While at William and Mary College he came under the influence of three liberal thinkers, William Small, George Wythe, and Francis Fauquier. It was at this time that he began to question the traditional religious dogmas of his day. He ultimately dismissed these doctrines as unreasonable.

Jefferson could not accept the institutional church of his day because he felt that it had been corrupted by the religious leadership. He considered these churchmen as enemies of freedom because they had suppressed the church members over the years and perverted the true teachings of Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, the religious group most highly favored by Jefferson was the Quakers who rejected the whole concept of the ministry. Theologians, such as John Calvin, were severely condemned by Jefferson for their part in corrupting the purity of Christ's teachings. Tracing the corruptions of Christianity Jefferson

came to the conclusion that the Apostle Paul was the first of these corruptors of Christianity.

With the rejection of orthodox Christianity Jefferson developed his own system of theology based on his own power to reason. For him all religion must be rational. Being strongly influenced by the deist concepts of Lord Bolingbroke, Jefferson leaned toward deism. Jefferson, like the deist, disavowed miracles and divine revelation as having any bearing in religion. The strongest force in Jefferson's religious life appears to have been Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian minister, and good friend of Jefferson's. Jefferson believed in a God who had created the world, but little could be known of this God save through observing nature. Hence the term "natural religion" is sometimes used to describe Jefferson's theology. While the idea of God was acceptable to Jefferson, the concept of a triune of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was not to be found in his thinking. Jesus Christ, for Jefferson, was a great religious reformer and moral teacher. To Jefferson the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith were not one in the same person. Jesus could only be accepted as the greatest of ancient moral teachers, not as the Son of God. While accepting the moral teachings of Jesus, miracles and the concept of divinity were rejected by Jefferson as being irrational.

To be able to use the part of Christ's teachings that would be accepted by the Jeffersonian mind he developed the Jefferson Bible, a harmony of the gospels. Jefferson then used the book as a devotional aid before retiring in the evening. All mention of Christ's miraculous birth, miracles, and resurrection from the dead were excluded from the work. With the development of his own version of the Bible, Jefferson laid aside the common ones as being corrupted by myths and embellishments.

Naturally, he rejected the authority of scripture. The concept of life after death was reasonable to him and therefore accepted by him.

All of Jefferson's religious convictions were restricted to only his closest friends. He desired to keep private his religion because of the harsh attacks upon him by various clergymen.

Jefferson brought his religious ideas into practical application by various means. The value of high moral character was often praised by him. Character could be raised by proper education and if that failed legislation might be enacted. His fight for religious freedom in Virginia and the United States was a result of his beliefs that freedom was a God-given matter. His work to keep the University of Virginia free from an established chair of divinity is seen as another effort to insure freedom of religion.

Jefferson rejected his own Anglican background, developed a personal theology and sought to create a sphere of influence whereby all religious groups could practice as they saw fit. Unorthodox in theology, a crusader for religious freedom, Jefferson was able to establish a pattern that has continued until today.



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## APPENDIX A

It is evident that Jefferson selected his New Testament materials carefully choosing only those statements that had nothing to do with the supernatural world. Moral teaching, parables, and biographical statements make up the greatest part of his selection.

L. 7. 36-46. a woman anointeth him.

Mk. 3. 31-35. L. 12. 1-7. 13-15. precepts.

L. 12. 16-21. parable of the rich man.

L. 12. 22-48. 54-59. L. 13. 1-5. precepts.

L. 13. 6-9. parable of the fig tree.

L. 11. 37-46. 52. 53. 54. precepts.

Mt. 13. 1-9. Mk. 4. 10. Mt. 13. 18-23. parable of the Sower.

Mk. 4. 21. 22. 23. precepts.

Mt. 13. 24-30. 36-52. parable of the Tares.

Mk. 4. 26-34. L. 9. 57-62. L. 5. 27-29. Mk. 2. 15-17. precepts.

L. 5. 36-39. parable of new wine in old bottles.

Mt. 13. 53-57. a prophet hath no honor in his own country.

Mt. 9. 36. Mk. 6. 7. Mt. 10. 5. 6. 9-18. 23. 26-31. Mk. 6. 12. 30.  
mission, instruction, return of apostles.

J. 7. 1. Mk. 7. 1-5. 14-24. Mt. 18. 1-4. 7-9. 12-17. 21-25.  
precepts.

Mt. 18. 23-35. parable of the wicked servant.

L. 10. 1-8. 10-12. mission of the LXX.

J. 7. 2-16. 19-26. 32. 43-53. the feast of the tabernacles.

J. 8. 1-11. the woman taken in adultery.

- J. 9. 1. 2. 3. to be born blind no proof of sin.
- J. 10. 1-5. 11-14. 16. the good shepherd.
- L. 10. 25-37. love God and thy neighbor. parable of the Samaritan.
- L. 11. 1-13. form of prayer.
- L. 14. 1-6. the Sabbath.
- L. 14. 7-24. the bidden to a feast.
- L. 14. 28-32. precepts.
- L. 15. 1-32. parables of the lost sheep and Prodigal son.
- L. 16. 1-15. parable of the unjust steward.
- L. 16. 18-31. parable of Lazarus.
- L. 17. 1-4. 7-10. 20. 26-36. precepts to be always ready.
- L. 18. 1-14. parables of the widow and judge, the Pharisee and Publican.
- L. 10. 38-42. Mt. 19. 1-26. precepts.
- Mt. 20. 1-16. parable of the laborers in the vineyard.
- L. 19. 1-28. Zaccheus, and the parable of the talents.
- Mt. 21. 1-3. 6-8. 10. J. 12. 19-24. Mt. 21. 17. goes to Jerusalem and Bethany.
- Mk. 11. 12. 15-19. the traders cast out from the temple.
- Mk. 11. 27. Mt. 21. 27-31. parable of the two sons.
- Mt. 21. 33. Mk. 12. 1-9. Mt. 21. 45. 46. parable of the vineyard and husbandmen.
- Mt. 22. 1-14. parable of the king and wedding.
- Mt. 22. 15-33. tribute. marriage. resurrection.
- Mk. 12. 28-31. Mt. 22. 40. Mk. 12. 32. 33. the two commandments.
- Mt. 23. 1-33. precepts. pride. hypocrisy. swearing.
- Mk. 12. 41-44. the widow's mite.
- Mt. 24. 1. 2. 16-21. 32. 33. 36-39. 40-44. Jerusalem and the day of judgment.

Mt. 24. 45-51. the faithful and wise servant.

L. 2. 1-7. Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born.

L. 2. 21. 39. he is circumcised and named and they return to Nazareth.

L. 2. 40. 42-48. 51. 52. at 12 years of age he accompanies his parents to Jerusalem and returns.

L. 3. 1. 2. Mk. 1. 4. Mt. 3. 4. 5. 6. John baptises in Jordan.

Mt. 3. 13. Jesus is baptised.

L. 3. 23. at 30 years of age.

J. 2. 12-16. drives the traders out of the temple.

J. 3. 22. Mt. 4. 12. Mk. 6. 17-28. he baptises but retires into Galilee on the death of John.

Mk. 1. 21. 22. he teaches in the Synagogue.

Mt. 12. 1-5. 9-12. Mk. 2. 27. Mt. 12. 14. 15. explains the Sabbath.

L. 6. 12-17. call of his disciples.

Mt. 5. 1-12. L. 6. 24. 25. 26. Mt. 5. 13-47. L. 6. 34. 35. 36.

Mt. 6. 1-34. 7. 1. L. 6. 38. Mt. 7. 3-20. 12. 35. 36. 37. 7. 24-29. the sermon on the Mount.

Mt. 8. 1. Mk. 6. 6. Mt. 10. 28. 29. 30. exhorts.

Mt. 25. 1-13. parable of the ten virgins.

Mt. 25. 14-30. parable of the talents.

L. 21. 34-36. Mt. 25. 31-46. the day of judgment.

Mk. 14. 1-8. a woman anointeth him.

Mt. 26. 14-16. Judas undertakes to point out Jesus.

Mt. 26. 17-20. L. 22. 24-27. J. 13. 2. 4-17. 21-26. 31. 34. 35.

Mt. 26. 31. 33.

L. 22. 33-34. Mt. 26. 35-45. precepts to his disciples. washes their feet. trouble of mind and prayer.

J. 18. 1-3. Mt. 26. 48-50. Judas conducts the officers to Jesus.



J. 18. 4-8. Mt. 26. 50-52. 55. 56. Mk. 14. 51. 52. Mt. 26. 57.  
J. 18. 15. 16. 18. 17.

J. 18. 25. 26. 27. Mt. 26. 75. J. 18. 19-23. Mk. 14. 55-61.  
L. 22. 67. 68. 70. Mk. 14. 63-65. he is arrested and carried  
before Caiaphas the High Priest and is condemned.

J. 18. 28-31. 33-38. L. 23. 5. Mt. 27. 13. is then carried to  
Pilate.

L. 23. 6-12. who sends him to Herod.

L. 23. 13-16. Mt. 27. 15-23. 26. receives him back, scourges and  
delivers him to execution.

Mt. 27. 27. 29-31. 38. L. 23. 26-32. J. 19. 17-24. Mt. 27. 39-43.

L. 23. 39-41. 34. J. 19. 25-27. Mt. 27. 46-55. 56. his crucifixion,  
death and burial.

J. 19. 31-34. 38-42. Mt. 27. 60. his burial.

Taken from the Jefferson Bible,  
as edited by Roche.

# APPENDIX B

MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
III 4-6, 13	I 4, 21-22	II 1-7, 21 39, 40, 42-45, 46-48, 51-52	II 12-16
IV 12	II 27 15-17		III 22
V 1-12, 13-47	III 31-35	III 1-2, 23	VII 1,2-16, 19-26, 32, 43-53
VI 1-34	IV 10, 21-23, 26-34	V 27-29, 36-38	VIII 1-11
VII 1-2, 3-20, 24-29	VI 6, 7, 12, 17-28, 30	VI 12-17, 24-26, 34-36, 38	IX 1-3
VIII 1	VII 1-5, 14-24	VII 36-46	X 1-5, 11-14, 16
IX 36	XI 12, 15-19, 27	IX 57-62	XII 19-24
X 5-6, 9-18, 23, 26-31	XII 1-9, 28-33, 4k-44	X 1-8, 10-12 25-37, 38-42	XIII 2, 4-17, 21-26, 31, 34-35
XI 28-30			XVIII 1-3, 4-8, 15-18, 25-27, 19-23, 28-31, 33-38
XII 1-5, 9-12 14-15, 35-37	XIV 1-8, 51-52, 53, 55-61, 63-65	XI 1-13, 37-54	
XIII 1-9, 18-23, 24-30, 36-52, 53-57		XII 1-7, 13-59	XIX 17-24, 25-27, 31-34, 38-42
		XIII 1-9	

MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
XVIII 1-4, 7-9 12-17, 21-35		XIV 1-12, 13-24, 28-32	
XIX 1-26		XV 1-32	
XX 1-16		XVI 1-31	
XXI 1-3, 6-8, 10, 17, 28-31, 33, 45-46		XVII 1-4, 7-10, 20, 26-37	
XXII 1-33, 40		XVIII 1-14	
XXIII 1-33		XIX 1-28	
XXIV 1-2, 16-21, 29, 32-33, 36-51		XXI 34-36	
XXV 1-46		XXII 24-27, 33-34, 67-68, 70	
XXVI 14-20, 31, 33, 35-45, 48-50, 50-52, 55-56, 57 75		XXIII 5-16, 26-32, 39-41, 34	
XXVII 13, 15-23, 26-27, 29-31, 38, 39-43, 46-50, 55-56, 60			

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