

## CUTTING AND PASTING

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Thomas Jefferson was a busy man. Author of the Declaration of Independence, Governor, ambassador to France, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President—he did not lack for things to do in his long public life. One might think that given his public pursuits, he wouldn't have time for much else. One would, of course, be wrong to think that.

In his copious spare time, Jefferson managed to study architecture, design, science, mathematics, religion and philosophy, to invent numerous clever devices for every-day living, to design and oversee a vast experimental farm on the grounds of Monticello, and to engage in regular correspondence with any number of contemporaries, friends and admirers. (see [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org) for more information)

His library was his pride and joy, and in addition to the English language, he “read in French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon, and collected books in their original languages.”

(<http://www.monticello.org/jefferson/dayinlife/sanctum/dig.html>) His 7000-book collection was sold to the United States in 1814, having been deemed worthy of replacing the books burned in the War of 1812, to become the collection of the Library of Congress. The system that library uses today to catalog its books can be traced to Jefferson's modifications to Francis Bacon's system of the classification of knowledge. (Church, in Jefferson)

Now, let's be clear: he was no saint. Thomas Jefferson, “renaissance man,” father of our nation, and protector of freedoms and liberties, owned several hundred slaves, whose labor created many of the things he is so often credited with. While, for example, his horticultural records and journals are amazing, do we really think he worked his farm, doing the back-breaking labor of tilling and planting and tending and reaping? No, he had slaves who did that.

I say this up front because I want to be clear that in celebrating Jefferson on this, the two hundred and sixty-fifth anniversary of his birth, I am not uncritical of how he lived.

Thomas Jefferson participated in a system that by *any* standards—those of our day or even those of his—was unforgivable. He did not challenge the notions of his day that non-European peoples were inferior.

All that we know of Jefferson must be tempered by our understanding of his complicity in the enslavement of African and African-American peoples. Even his relationship with Sally Hemings, which many today would like to see as a forbidden romance that shows Jefferson's true heart, must be seen through the lens of slavery, and cannot be considered consensual or healthy. He was far from perfect.

Yet we cannot throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Jefferson's contributions to our nation were many, and his contributions to American religion were important and worthy of consideration.

So, today I thought it fitting to spend some time looking at one of his endeavors in particular: his decades-long interest in applying Enlightenment reason to religion, and specifically his study of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Thomas Jefferson was a busy man. He was involved in so many important studies and projects that he limited himself to four or five hours of sleep a night in order that he might have more time to pursue all manners of knowledge.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that it took him some twenty years to get around to finishing the project that has been handed down to us as *The Jefferson Bible*.

Jefferson, as I mentioned, studied religion very carefully. He was especially interested in the ways in which Christianity had evolved from the teachings of Jesus into a complex religion whose denominations fought over the correct dogmas and structures and interpretations of Scripture.

One of the people Jefferson often engaged in conversation about religion with was Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia physician and famous Universalist. By 1800, Jefferson had promised Rush that he would, at some point, devote some time to explaining how his views of Christianity—decidedly Unitarian in their form (that is, rejecting the divinity of Jesus and seeing him instead as a great teacher and prophet), and rejecting much of the dogma of the churches of his day.

Over the following years, Jefferson explained that he had come to understand that “the teachings of Jesus were incomplete and had suffered badly at the hands of those who had edited them,” but that “the fragments remaining showed a master workman, whose ‘system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime...ever taught....’” (Church in Jefferson, p.5)

Of course, during this time Jefferson was Vice President and then President of the United States. Needless to say, he set this project aside. Interestingly, he turned to another Philadelphia resident, the Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley, hoping to convince Priestley to take up this work instead.

Jefferson wrote to Priestley with these thoughts: “I should proceed to a view of the life, character and doctrines of Jesus,” he wrote, “who...endeavored to bring [his society]... to the principles of pure deism, and juster notions of the attributions of God, [and] to reform their moral doctrines to the standard or reason, justice and philanthropy....” (Jefferson, 9)

In 1804, Priestley accepted the challenge, much to Jefferson’s delight. Had Priestley not died a few weeks later, we might never have seen *The Jefferson Bible*.

Forrest Church contends that what Priestley likely would have produced would have been very different from what Jefferson put together, finally, in 1820. Church teaches us that Priestley was much more willing to accept that what was written in the Gospels was true, and would have been far less critical in his analysis than Jefferson was. (Church, in Jefferson, 14-15)

Whatever might have been, after sixteen more years of thinking about how he would accomplish this task—thinking that is painstakingly catalogued in letters to Rush, John Adams, and others, Jefferson finally began his project.

In 1820, Thomas Jefferson sat down with a pile of Bibles: one in the original Greek, one with the Latin translation, the King James Version (translated to English from the Latin translation of the Greek), as well as English and French translations made directly from the Greek.

He took these bibles, and, with his years of study of religion behind him, he began, quite literally, to cut and paste, to create a Gospel from those in the Christian Scriptures that he could defend as reasonable, one that stripped the “masterwork” of Jesus’ teachings down to their essential core, free of the accretions of almost two thousand years of religion.

Jefferson biographer Charles Sanford writes that Jefferson “emphasized the moral teachings of Jesus and avoided the incidents and declarations in the New Testament which suggest Jesus’ divinity, which was his avowed intention....” (Sanford, 104)

Historian Edwin Gaustad notes that “if a moral lesson was embedded in a miracle, the lesson survived in the Jeffersonian scripture, but the miracle did not.” (Gaustad, 129)

Jefferson notably eliminates much of the story of Jesus’ mystical origins. Gone is the story of the virgin birth. Gone is the story of resurrection (in fact, the story ends, notably with the sealing of Jesus’ tomb—never in the Jefferson Bible do we read that the stone was rolled away at all).

What is left are the biography of a man, born to humans, whose teachings are remembered by others through homilies and parables, stories and sayings.

But the largest lessons that should be drawn from the creation of the Jefferson Bible are not the particular teachings of Jesus that Jefferson chose. Instead, on this anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s birth, I think it wise to honor him for his insistence on both a religion that passed the tests of reason and also the freedom of religious belief.

Forrest Church writes that “Jefferson’s was a search not so much for the historical but for the intelligible Jesus.” (Church in Jefferson, 31) Above all, Jefferson’s view of Jesus was that his teachings needed to make sense.

“People,” Jefferson believed, “arrived at truth not through the cloudy and corrupted medium of revelation but through the clear and clean oracle of Reason.” (Gaustad, 28)

Sanford quotes Jefferson as saying that in writing his Bible, he “wanted to throw out the ‘rubbish’ in the New Testament of ‘so much ignorance, absurdity, untruth, charlatanism and imposture’ so that the ‘gold of fine imagination, correct morality and most lovely benevolence’ might shine forth.” (Sanford, 105)

Jefferson made a point to reject Scripture that contained, in his estimation, “incomprehensible dogmas and mystifications” (Jefferson as quoted in Sanford, 105) which, he felt, served to divide religions instead of the moral lessons that could unite them. And he believed, perhaps incomprehensibly to those of us who today see so much reliance on biblical literalism and intolerance in religion, that reason was the key to bridging religious differences.

In this, Jefferson was a product of the Enlightenment thought of his time. His contemporary Ethan Allen in 1784 wrote that “I am persuaded that if mankind would dare to exercise their reason as freely on those divine topics

as they do in the common concerns of life, they would, in great measure, rid themselves of their blindness and superstition.” (Allen, as quoted in Gaustad, 29-30)

One of Jefferson’s reasoned arguments of particular note to us is his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity in favor of a Unitarian theology.

Gaustad writes that “in attacking the doctrine of the Trinity... on rational grounds, Jefferson pointed out what seemed to be to him all too obvious—that it was ‘too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three; and yet the one is not three, and the three are not one.’” (Gaustad, 138)

John Adams, in agreeing with Jefferson’s assessment, likened Trinitarian theology to believing “that 2 and 2 make 5.” (Adams as quoted in Gaustad, 139) Needless to say, the two, corresponding with one another over the course of many years, only confirmed each others’ Unitarianism—and, unfortunately, neither thought they needed to present this case to the wider society.

You see, Thomas Jefferson’s story is also one profoundly linked with religious freedom. One of the three things Jefferson asked to be remembered for on his gravestone was his authorship of the Virginia declaration of religious freedom. Similarly, it was Jefferson’s influence that preserved freedom of religion and banned the establishment of a state religion in the United States.

But Jefferson’s devotion to private religious freedom was at least as interesting as his role in championing public religious freedom.

For example, though Jefferson’s professed theology was Unitarian, and many of his closest theological advisors and correspondents were either Unitarian (in the case of Priestley, Henry Wilder Foote, Jared Sparks, John Adams and others) or Universalist (in the case of Rush, and also Elhanan Winchester and John Murray), Jefferson was steadfast in his refusal to join a congregation of any sort.

Indeed, Jefferson made his bible for his own use, and not for publication to a wider audience. He thankfully shared it with a few friends, for it is their copies that survived past Jefferson’s death. But even his religious exploration was intended to be a private pursuit.

Part of this had to do with his sense of personal religious freedom. As a public figure, Jefferson was instrumental in protecting the freedom of religion for all Americans, but as a private person, Jefferson believed that his religion was a matter of his own conscience, and not something to involve religious institutions with.

In a letter to one of his many friends, Jefferson wrote, “The priests indeed have heretofore thought proper to ascribe to me religious, or rather anti-religious sentiments of their own fabric, but such as soothed their resentments against the act of Virginia for establishing religious freedom. They wished 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.... For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read.” (Jefferson, as quoted in B.L. Rayner, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, found on-line at <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/biog/lj35.htm>)

Not that Jefferson was religious alone. We know so much about Jefferson's religious beliefs precisely because he wrote so much about them to the many people with whom he regularly exchanged correspondence. Jefferson's religion was not as private as he made it out to be—he just felt strongly that the religious institutions of his day did not have his religious freedom at their heart.

It is a shame that Jefferson, in his day, did not have access to a community that affirmed and promoted the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, as Unitarian Universalist congregations do today.

Even today, though, there are people out there who are convinced that there is not a religious home for their unorthodox theology. There are people out there who believe fervently that “organized religion” necessarily means dogma and superstition and narrow-mindedness.

People believe this because they know no other way of being religious.

Let us, therefore, on this, the two hundred and sixty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, finally learn that we should not to follow in Jefferson's mistakes. Being religious together is a good thing. While we might have him to thank for being allowed to practice our religion in freedom, let us not keep it on our shelf, only to be looked at by candlelight in the wee hours of the night when, instead, we should be sleeping.

## WORKS AND WEBSITES CONSULTED

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### **Websites:**

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello: [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org)

The White House official biography of Thomas Jefferson: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/tj3.html>

Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive at the University of Virginia: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/>