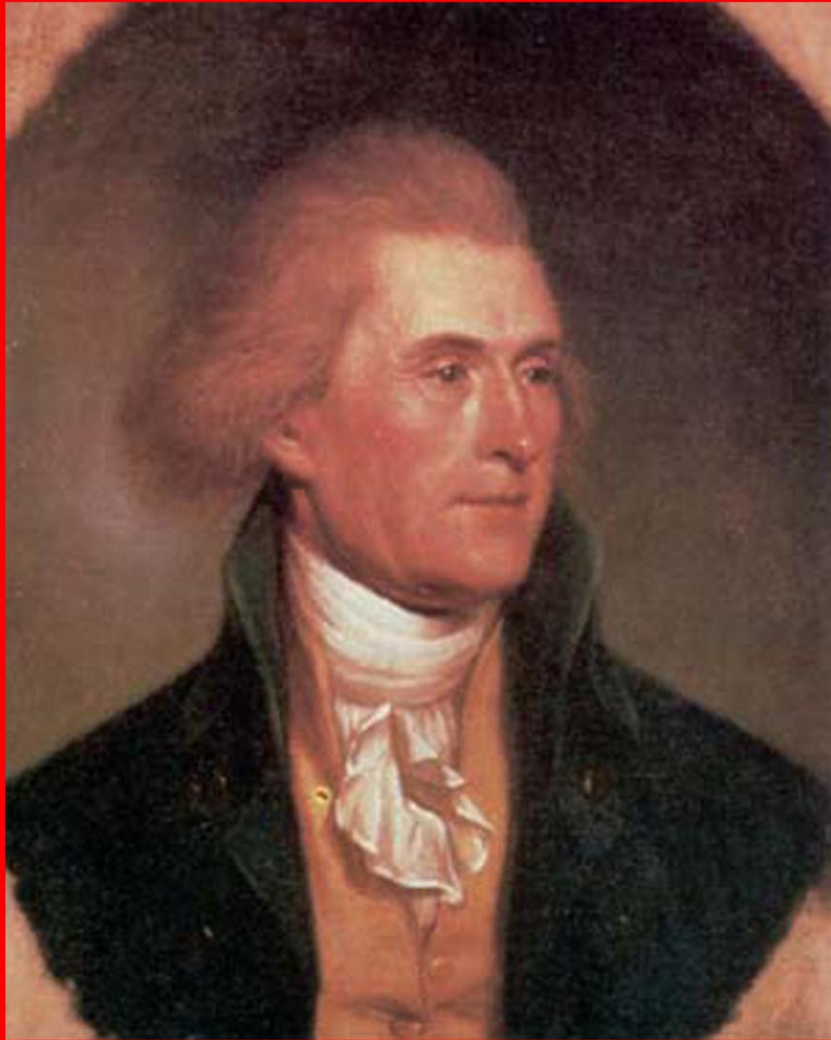


Thomas Jefferson and Deism



by Bob Johnson

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Thomas Jefferson and Deism

Introduction

The American founder Thomas Jefferson is often used by the religious right to make their erroneous point that America was founded as a Christian nation. Recently the leading “historian” of the religious right, David Barton, in an effort to help turn America into a Christian theocracy wrote a book, *The Jefferson Lies*, which promotes the false idea that Jefferson was a devout Christian who wanted America to be Bible based. Barton's book was so full of lies his publisher ended up [pulling](#) it from bookshelves and is currently working with its partners to stop it from being sold as an eBook. (It's amusing that Christians today try to claim Jefferson as a Christian when Christians in his day attacked him and called him an Atheist!)

This eBooklet will clearly demonstrate that contrary to Barton and the religious right, Thomas Jefferson was not a Christian. Even worse for the religious right's agenda, this eBooklet will show that Jefferson was a Deist.

Deism is belief in God (which also means Jefferson was not an Atheist) based on the application of our reason on the laws and designs in Nature. Deists believe these designs point us to our Designer. Deists also strongly reject all unreasonable claims, even those made by the various “revealed”/hearsay religions. Jefferson's Deism, because it is a belief in God, is too often twisted and used by the religious right to mislead people into thinking that Jefferson was a Christian. (The fact that Barton's book was pulled by his own publisher shows the religious right has an agenda which has no interest in truth.)

This eBooklet will also shed light on the rich Deistic roots of the American Republic. For Jefferson was not alone among the founders in his Deism. Deism is found in the Declaration of Independence and in the complete rejection of the type of government promoted in the Bible.

Hopefully, as more and more people are made aware of the blatant lies of the religious right in painting a false picture of America as being founded as a Christian nation, as well as being made aware of the existence of the religious/spiritual philosophy of Deism which was so important to many of America's key founders, the revolution in religion the American founder and Deist Thomas Paine (Paine was a good friend Thomas Jefferson) called for in his monumental book on God, Deism and religion, *The Age of Reason, The Complete Edition*, will become a life improving and world improving reality.

Progress!

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Was Thomas Jefferson a Christian?

Before we can answer the question of Thomas Jefferson being a Christian or not, we must define what a Christian is and what Christianity is.

Thomas Paine made a great point in *The Age of Reason, The Complete Edition* when he wrote, “The Calvinist, who damns children of a span long to hell to burn forever for the glory of God (and this is called Christianity), and the Universalist who preaches that all shall be saved and none shall be damned (and this also is called Christianity), boasts alike of their holy [revealed] religion and their Christian faith.”

As Paine made clear by the above quote, a precise definition of what Christianity is and what a Christian is seems to be lacking. People who consider themselves to be Christians cover the entire spectrum of those who believe in predestination as Calvinists do, as well as Universalists who believe the opposite of Calvinists. There are also other requirements which some Christians hold to be vitally important while other Christians virtually ignore them. Requirements of whether baptism is required and, and if it is, whether baptism by submersion is necessary or whether just a sprinkling of water will do the trick. These differences in opinion of what constitutes Christianity and a true Christian have historically been taken deadly serious by Christians. For example, the 30 Years War saw Christians who disagreed with each other slaughter so many of one another that they actually reduced the population of Germany by 30 percent!

Many Christians today seem to think that a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is the only son of God who died on the cross to wash away their sins so they can enjoy eternal life. Using this most basic of definitions of what a Christian is, we can easily see by his own hand/writings that Thomas Jefferson did not satisfy even this most rudimentary definition of a Christian.

A letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Dr. Benjamin Rush on April 21, 1803 is often taken out of context by the religious right to show that Jefferson was in fact a Christian. In particular they take the line, “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;” erroneously placing a period after “others.” However, the remainder of the same sentence makes it very clear that Christians of today would reject Thomas Jefferson as a Christian. The remainder of it reads, “ascribing to himself every *human* excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.” (The italics are Jefferson's.) Add to this this statement Jefferson made to William Short in a letter dated August 4, 1820: “Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the Son of God.” Even the religious left would probably reject Jefferson as a Christian based on an interview with Hillary Clinton. In the [interview](#) with the *New York Times* on July 6, 2007 she said she believed the resurrection of Jesus was an historic fact and that she believes “the whole Bible is real.”

Thomas Jefferson obviously never would have said he believed “the whole Bible is real” as he actually cut and pasted the Gospels in order to “separate the diamonds from the dung.” Today the result of this effort by Jefferson is known as *The Jefferson Bible*. The very fact that he actually literally cut out what he considered nonsense and not true and only kept in what he thought was true clearly informs us that he did not think much of the Bible and that he in no way considered it to be the word of God. And what he did remove makes clear his sincerity in his above mentioned letter to Dr. Rush in which he said he did not believe Jesus made any claims to being anything other than human, as all Gospel reference to miracles, etc. were removed by Jefferson. (There is even a very strong possibility that Jesus never even existed. Here's a [link](#) to some articles both pro and con on this question.)

The Book of Revelation

A key tool in the pocket of Christian clergy used to keep their flocks in fear and under control is the Book of Revelation. This nonsensical last book of the Christian Bible is a Christian picture of what is soon going to befall planet Earth and all the people who inhabit it. It is loaded with monsters, violence, great suffering and all the things needed to promote fear over God-given reason.

In response to a letter from General Alexander Smyth in which he asked Jefferson for his thoughts on his, Smyth's, explanation of the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation, Jefferson's letter dated January 17, 1825, makes very clear what Thomas Jefferson thought of the Book of Revelation. In his answer he wrote that he "considered it as merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams. I was, therefore, well pleased to see, in your first proof sheet, that it was said to be not the production of St. John, but of Cerinthus, a century after the death of that apostle. Yet the change of the author's name does not lessen the extravagances of the composition; and come they from whomsoever they may, I cannot so far respect them as to consider them as an allegorical narrative of events, past or subsequent. There is not coherence enough in them to countenance any suite of rational ideas. You will judge, therefore, from this how impossible I think it that either your explanation, or that of any man in 'the heavens above, or on the earth beneath,' can be a correct one. What has no meaning admits no explanation; and pardon me if I say, with the candor of friendship, that I think your time too valuable, and your understanding of too high an order, to be wasted on these paralogisms. You will perceive, I hope, also, that I do not consider them as revelations of the Supreme Being, whom I would not so far blaspheme as to impute to Him a pretension of revelation, couched at the same time in terms which, He would know, were never to be understood by those to whom they were addressed."

Not only did Jefferson reject Christianity because of the insane ideas it promotes and its ungodly rejection of our gift from God of reason, he also rejected Christianity because it has often been used to suppress the rights of the people. In a letter dated June 24, 1826, just a little over one week prior to his death, Thomas Jefferson wrote Roger C. Weightman turning down Weightman's invitation to Jefferson to a Fourth of July celebration. (Like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson died on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1826.) In the letter Jefferson wrote concerning the Declaration of Independence, "May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."

It's very clear from these examples from Thomas Jefferson himself that he in no way was a Christian. His ideas on Jesus, ironically, show Jefferson to be a Deist.

Thomas Jefferson and Deism

In the first letter mentioned above from Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush we learn that Jefferson did not look at Jesus as the son of God or as a savior or as a messiah of any kind. Instead, Thomas Jefferson looked at Jesus as a Deist.

I'd like to point out that Deism is a very simple and honest belief system. The only two requirements are that you believe in God based on the application of your reason on the designs and laws found in Nature and that you reject unreasonable claims. That's it. Jefferson's definition of Deism as shown in this letter to Dr. Rush takes a view of Deism which can also be seen as merely monotheism or "the belief in one only God." This is along the lines of what Thomas Paine wrote in his [essay](#) *Of the Religion of Deism Compared With the Christian Religion* in which Paine writes that Deism, the belief in God, is the cornerstone of all of the world's religions.

Thomas Jefferson classified Judaism as a form of Deism. He wrote, "II. Jews. 1. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief in one only God. But their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious.

"2. Their Ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason and morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; and repulsive and anti-social, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation, therefore, in an eminent degree."

Jefferson was no doubt referring to the genocide and child rape the Hebrews/Jews committed against their neighbors as recorded in numerous Hebrew Bible/Old Testament passages such as [Numbers 31:17-18](#) in which Moses ordered the Israeli army to commit genocide and rape little girls. It reads, "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves." Verse 35 tells us the number of the women children they kept alive for themselves was 32,000.

Jefferson continues in his letter, "III. Jesus. In this state of things among the Jews, Jesus appeared. His parentage was obscure; his condition poor; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct and innocent; he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, and of the sublimest eloquence. . . He corrected the Deism of the Jews, confirming them in their belief of one only God, and giving them juster notions of his attributes and government."

You can see that in this important letter from Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush that Jefferson saw Jesus as a mere human and as a Deist. He did not see him in any divine way. As he saw Jesus as a Deist attempting to correct the Deism of the Jews he must of seen the doctrines of Jesus as being Deistic doctrines which he was using to correct the Deism of the Jews. And as he wrote in the first part of the letter that he was "sincerely attached to his doctrines," Jefferson was attached to Deistic doctrines and was, like Jesus was to him, a Deist.

Deists are interested in facts and truth more than accepting ideas simply based on tradition. Thomas Jefferson made this very clear in his daily life. For example, when he gave advice to his nephew Peter Carr regarding religion he wrote, "In the first place divest yourself of all bias in favor of novelty and singularity of opinion. Indulge them in any other subject rather than that of religion. It is too important, and the consequences of error may be too serious. On the other hand shake off all the fears and servile

prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first the religion of your own country. Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The facts which are within the ordinary course of nature, you will believe on the authority of the writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus. The testimony of the writer weighs in their favor, in one scale, and their not being against the laws of nature, does not weigh against them. 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 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 revolution, and that without a second general prostration. Is this arrest of the earth's motion, or the evidence which affirms it, most within the law of probabilities? You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law, which punished the first commission of that offence by whipping, and the second by exile, or death "in furea"....

“Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision. I forgot to observe, when speaking of the New Testament, that you should read all the histories of Christ, as well of those whom a council of ecclesiastics have decided for us, to be Pseudo-evangelists, as those they named Evangelists. Because these Pseudo-evangelists pretended to inspiration, as much as the others, and you are to judge their pretensions by your own reason, and not by the reason of those ecclesiastics. Most of these are lost. There are some, however, still extant, collected by Fabricius, which I will endeavor to get and send you.” This doesn't sound very Christian like!

Thomas Jefferson's political enemies tried to label him as “an atheist, a deist or devil.” In *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* Charles B. Sanford says the correct answer is Deist.

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