

CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

THE
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY WHITE PAPER

THE CONSERVATIVE "CHRISTIANIZATION"
OF THOMAS JEFFERSON:

A NEW BOOK CLAIMS AMERICA'S
GREAT CHAMPION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
AND TOLERANCE WAS ACTUALLY JUST
A CONVENTIONALLY DEVOUT AND PIOUS
CHRISTIAN. SADLY, MILLIONS OF
AMERICANS WILL BELIEVE IT'S TRUE.

BY ANDREW LEVISON

TDS WHITE PAPER – THE CONSERVATIVE “CHRISTIANIZATION” OF THOMAS JEFFERSON: A NEW BOOK CLAIMS AMERICA’S GREAT CHAMPION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE WAS ACTUALLY JUST A CONVENTIONALLY DEVOUT AND PIOUS CHRISTIAN. SADLY, MILLIONS OF AMERICANS WILL BELIEVE IT’S TRUE.

By Andrew Levison

David Barton is a well known conservative author and exponent of the “America was originally meant to be a Christian Nation” perspective. His latest book is called *The Jefferson Lies—exposing the myths you’ve always believed about Thomas Jefferson*.

Aside from some digressions into the subjects of Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemmings and his ownership of slaves, the main thrust of the book is simple. It seeks to show that—aside from what Barton calls a few “*nuances of some particular doctrines*”—Thomas Jefferson was essentially a conventional, deeply religious Christian. It seeks to convince its substantial audience of Christian conservatives that Jefferson was really little different in his religious views than most of the other devout and pious, church-going Americans of his era.

This is not an easy task. Of all the founding fathers, Jefferson has always been considered the most open-minded, freethinking and “modern” of the founding fathers—a fact underlined by the recent cover story on Religion in *Newsweek Magazine* that featured Jefferson’s unique religious philosophy. Americans who are opposed to the creation of a “Christian America” and the ideology of conservative Christianity in general find Jefferson a uniquely appealing figure because of his support for religious tolerance, freedom of conscience and opposition to theocratic ideas.

More specifically, Jefferson championed three principles that seem uniquely modern and relevant for today:

- That science and religion are compatible.
- That religious tolerance and freedom of belief are the cornerstones of the American ethos and that it is impossible to advocate the creation of a “Christian Nation” without profoundly undermining the fundamental American values of individual freedom, liberty and individual rights.
- That society can uphold basic moral values without having to endorse the specific doctrines or beliefs of any particular church or religion.¹

The three aspects of Thomas Jefferson’s religious philosophy noted above are also discussed in the related TDS Memo: http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Jefferson2.pdf

Although Jefferson's religious philosophy is complex, the broad outline of his views are generally agreed upon by historians. The two leading books on Jefferson's religious philosophy—Edwin Gaustad's *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* and Charles Sanford's *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* and also the major scholarly books on the religious views of the Founding Fathers basically coincide in the following outline of his views:

1. Jefferson was a Deist whose religious faith was based on God's "works" as manifested in nature and natural laws rather than on revealed texts or specific church doctrines. His religious faith was based on reason rather than revelation and on the laws of nature rather than the doctrines of any specific religious sect.

As Jefferson scholar Eugene Sheridan put it in his monograph "*Jefferson and Religion*":

For Jefferson, human reason, not supernatural revelation or ecclesiastical authority was the sole arbiter of religious truth. Thus, through rational investigation he came to believe in a supreme being who created the universe and continued to sustain it by means of fixed, mathematically precise natural laws.²

In *Sworn on the Altar of God: a Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*, the historian Edwin Gaustad provides a perceptive description of Jefferson's views:

The laws of nature were God's laws; they did not have any independent status all their own. They came into being by God's decree, and they continued to operate, as Newton demonstrated, through God's unceasing providential direction. Unlike many other deists, Jefferson did not hold that God created the world and then retired from the scene; rather, he believed that God continued to create and sustain the world moment by moment.³

2. Jefferson did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. He saw Jesus as the greatest teacher of ethics and morals in human history, but also as a mortal human being and not the divine son of God.

In his early life, Jefferson had viewed Jesus through the thick intermediate layers of Protestant, Calvinist and specifically Anglican theology, and, as a result, visualized him in a largely conventional and remote way. In 1803, however, he was deeply influenced by the leading chemist and Unitarian J.B. Priestley's study "Socrates and Jesus Compared." The book convinced Jefferson that Jesus could be studied as a profound moral philosopher entirely separately from the belief that he was the divine son of God. As Jefferson wrote in 1820 "*That Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the son of God, physically speaking, I have been convinced by the writings of men more learned than myself.*"⁴

Jesus' ethical philosophy, Jefferson, concluded, was the first to be truly universal—designed to apply to every human being on Earth and not just a single race or social elite—and was thus egalitarian and democratic in a way no previous ethical system had been. This, combined with Jesus' "humility, innocence, and simplicity of manners, neglect of riches, and absence of worldly ambition and honors" created in Jefferson's mind a picture of Jesus as a real flesh and blood human being and not a demigod.

3. Jefferson believed that religion was fundamentally a private matter between each individual and God, one that should be left entirely to each person's individual conscience. As a result, throughout his life he remained the great advocate and champion of religious tolerance and the freedom of conscience.

In Jefferson's view, any attempt by either government or religious majorities to impose particular religious views -- whether by imposing taxes to support religion, requiring religious tests for public office or decreeing government-sanctioned prayers or ritual observances—represented an act of tyranny that inevitably violated every citizen's fundamental freedom and individual rights.

As Jefferson put it, "to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical".⁵ Requiring individuals to participate in public prayers or ceremonies against their will or publically shaming them for refusing to participate was equally "sinful and tyrannical" in his view.

The alternative Jefferson advocated throughout his life was religious tolerance—allowing each individual to follow his own conscience without any coercion or social pressure. His vision was embodied in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom which he considered one of the greatest accomplishments of his political life. The statute stated:

That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinion and belief.⁶

At the last moment, there was an attempt to smuggle a sectarian endorsement of Christianity into the legislation. The law's preamble described religious intolerance as "a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion." It was proposed to add the words "Jesus Christ" before "the holy author", but, as Jefferson later noted, "the insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindu and infidel of every denomination."⁷

4. Jefferson believed that society did need to be based on and to teach basic moral and ethical principles but that these principles could be taught and upheld without requiring people to accept specific religious doctrines or supernatural beliefs.

As Jefferson said:

The interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree and that we should not meddle with the particular dogmas in which all religions differ and which are totally unconnected with morality.⁸

This view of Jefferson's had two practical consequences. First, in planning the University of Virginia, Jefferson sought to have houses of worship and religious observance respected and given a location on the campus, but not made a part of the academic curriculum of the University itself. The same view led Jefferson to edit a version of the bible that concentrated

entirely on Jesus' moral and ethical philosophy and omitted the doctrinal and supernatural aspects of the gospels.

This brief summary of Jefferson's religious views is not seriously disputed. The quotes given above are among most famous and well-known of Jefferson's statements on religion precisely because they capture the essence of his unique religious philosophy.

This makes Jefferson a uniquely difficult subject for conservative Christians. While Jefferson was sincerely religious and genuinely believed in God, he also forcefully rejected revelation, the divinity of Jesus and the goal of making America an explicitly Christian, theocratic nation. As a result, many religious conservatives are forthright in condemning Jefferson. Leading conservative TV and radio evangelist James Kennedy, for example, says "Jefferson was not, in my opinion, a genuine Christian." He "rejected the deity of Christ" and "never experienced the new birth that Jesus told Nicodemus was necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven."⁹

Even more dramatically, the *United States History for Christian Schools*—one of the leading textbooks used in the home schooling and Christian schooling movements—bluntly defines Jefferson as nothing less than "an antichrist." It states "*American believers can appreciate Jefferson's rich contribution to the development of their nation, but they must beware his view of Christ as a good teacher but not the incarnate son of god. As the apostle John said "who is a liar but he who denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is Antichrist, that denieth the Father and Son."*¹⁰

David Barton, however, although he is a leading figure in the Christian right and the struggle to make America a "Christian Nation," is the exponent of a very different approach to Jefferson. Instead of condemning Jefferson, he seeks to essentially rewrite history and convert Jefferson into an entirely conventional 18th century Christian.

Considering the facts above, at first glance this would seem an impossible task. But Barton's solution is to create an entirely fictional straw man and then melodramatically refute it, using the noisy distraction thus created to minimize or trivialize Jefferson's quite substantial departures from Christian orthodoxy.

In the alternative universe where Barton lives, most university and public school students today are taught an absolute myth: that Thomas Jefferson was a belligerent, religion-hating atheist who detested the clergy, loathed the bible and wanted to purge religion from society every bit as thoroughly as was done under 20th century communist regimes.

The chapter headings in Barton's book dramatically define the "lies" he claims not only "*dominate the study of American history*" but fill "*most textbooks, the Web and popular knowledge.*" According to these detestable lies, Jefferson was:

"an Atheist and not a Christian"

"hated the clergy"

"wrote his own bible"

*“advocated a secular public square” **

“founded a secular university”

It is important to notice that none of these “lies”—which Barton claims are quite literally universal in the academic world—actually correspond with the portrait of Jefferson’s religious views that is presented in most standard history books and academic courses. Barton gets around this problem by instead providing quotes from a variety of websites, non-scholarly magazines, personal blogs and other non-academic sources. He diverts attention from the relatively “fringe” sources of most of his “lies” by noting the sources only in the footnotes.

Having invented this breathtakingly false straw man—*Thomas Jefferson as a bible hating, clergy loathing militant combative atheist*—Barton then proceeds to demolish it with page after page of breathless bullet points. Here is just a partial listing:

- When the British planned to blockade Boston Harbour in 1773, Jefferson introduced a measure in the Virginia legislature calling for a public day of fasting and prayer to be observed on that same day “devoutly to implore the Divine interposition in behalf of an injured and oppressed people.”
- He also recommended that legislators “proceed with the Speaker and the Mace to the Church ...and that the Reverend Mr. Price be appointed to read prayers, and the Reverend Mr. Gwatkin to preach a sermon suitable to the occasion.”
- Additionally, Jefferson wrote home to his local church community in Monticello urging them also to arrange a special day of prayer and worship at “the new church on Hardware River”—a service which Jefferson attended.
- On July 4, 1776, Jefferson was placed on a committee of three to draft an official seal for the new American government. His recommendation was from the Bible: “The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.”
- ...Jefferson had a designated seat at the Capitol church: “The seat he chose the first Sabbath, and the adjoining one, which his private secretary occupied, were ever afterwards by the courtesy of the congregation left for him and his secretary.”
- For those services Jefferson rode his horse from the White House to the Capitol, a distance of 1.6 miles and a trip of about twenty minutes. He made this ride regardless of weather conditions. Among Representative Cutler’s entries is one noting that “[i]t was very rainy, but his [Jefferson’s] ardent zeal brought him through the rain and on horseback to the Hall.” Other diary entries similarly confirm Jefferson’s faithful attendance despite bad weather.

**Note: The term “the Public Square,” particularly when used by religious conservatives like Barton, refers to more than just narrowly defined “government-owned public property.” The term “the Public Square” originated in ancient Greece and is used to refer to any community spaces where social life goes on. It can include parks, plazas, concert halls, street corners, athletic fields, street fairs, neighborhood association meetings, parking lots, music festivals and anywhere else that citizens come in contact with each other. As a result, in conservative Christian discourse, a “secular public square” is a general term for a social system where religion is barred from open participation in ordinary daily social and community life and does not refer only to government- owned property where sectarian religious displays and ceremonies are not permitted)*

- President Jefferson personally contributed to the worship atmosphere of the Capitol church by having the Marine Band play at the services.
- Under President Jefferson Sunday church services were also started at the War Department and the Treasury Department which were two government buildings under his direct control. Therefore, on any given Sunday, worshippers could choose between attending church at the US Capitol, the War Department, or the Treasury Department, all with the blessing and support of Jefferson.

Other presidential actions of Jefferson included:

- Urging the commissioners of the District of Columbia to sell land for the construction of a Roman Catholic Church, recognizing “the advantages of every kind which it would promise” (1801)
- Signing federal acts setting aside government lands so that missionaries might be assisted in “propagating the Gospel” among the Indians (1802, and again in 1803 and 1804)
- Directing the secretary of war to give federal funds to a religious school established for Cherokees in Tennessee
- Negotiating and signing a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians that directly funded Christian missionaries and provided federal funding to help erect a church building in which they might worship (1803)
- Assuring a Christian school in the newly purchased Louisiana Territory that it would enjoy “the patronage of the government” (1804)

Finally, in an item that Barton treats as a veritable “smoking gun,” he notes that Jefferson closed presidential documents with the appellation “*in the year of our Lord.*” To underline this extraordinary discovery, he helpfully includes a scanned image of one such document that displays Jefferson’s actual handwriting.

As can be seen, Barton does not merely beat the utterly dead horse of Jefferson’s supposedly militant atheism but frantically batters it into something the consistency of guacamole. Oh My God, look! Jefferson went to Church—even in bad weather! Wow, Jefferson funded missionary schools! ” Look, Jefferson called for prayers! Oh, Jefferson had the Marine Band play at the Capital Church! And—the “smoking gun”—Jefferson signed his presidential documents “in the year of our lord!”

A reasonable reader can only think that these actions would actually be somehow incongruous for an American president in the late 1700’s if he or she actually believed the notion that Jefferson really was an early forerunner of the most militant and belligerent 20th century atheists such as the late Christopher Hitchens, Lenin, Stalin or Ayn Rand. For a reader familiar with Jefferson’s actual religious views and the realities of 18th century political life, on the other hand, none of these things are in any way startling nor do they disprove any of the basic concepts serious historians assert about Jefferson’s religious philosophy.*

*Note: Jefferson is often associated with the phrase “a high wall of separation between Church and state” but this is a term that he used only once in a letter and that only became important as a specific legal doctrine in the late 1940’s. Jefferson’s own basic perspective on the proper

Barton has presented similar “laundry list” proofs of Jefferson’s non-atheism in the past in many speeches and personal interviews—usually in a similarly manic style. In a book-length historical revision of Jefferson, however, this kind of breathless, hyperventilating recitation is not sufficient to completely avoid grappling with Jefferson’s actual views.

Barton’s solution is to concede certain facts about Jefferson’s religious views, but to minimize and isolate them as very minor deviations from Christian orthodoxy when compared to the massive “lies” about Jefferson’s religious philosophy that he is heroically refuting. Let us look at the major issues in turn.

1. Jefferson’s Rejection of Revelation

Before examining Barton’s explanation of Jefferson’s views, it is worth looking more closely at what Jefferson actually said about revelation. In a famous letter to his cousin advising the young man on how to form his religious views, Jefferson advised him as follows:

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 book of Joshua we are told that 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, beast and so on. But it is said that the writer of that book was inspired... 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...¹¹

In another letter Jefferson expresses his rejection of revelation and his faith in science and scientific laws clearly:

I think that every Christian sect gives a great handle to atheism by their general dogma that, without a revelation, there would not be sufficient proof of the being of God ...on the contrary I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the universe ...the movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their courses by the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces ...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, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion.

Faced with these statements, Barton offers not one but three different explanations.

First, Barton argues that Jefferson didn’t really believe what he was saying about revelation in his letter to his cousin. Rather, he was training his cousin Peter in how to better defend Christianity. Barton argues that Jefferson was actually instructing Peter in “apologetics”—the defense of the traditional elements of religious faith. As Barton explains it:

relationship between church and state is more accurately captured by his basic principles of “religious tolerance,” “freedom of conscience,” “protection of the rights of religious minorities” and by the language of the First Amendment

“Jefferson believed that the time had come for the 17 year old to know not just what he believed but why he believed it—and to be able to defend his beliefs “

Second, Barton argues, in effect, that the theological belief in the “compatibility” of revelation and reason was a very widely held view in Jefferson’s day—so much so that Jefferson probably believed it as well. Barton spends several pages describing the views of various contemporaries of Jefferson such as Elias Boudinot and John Witherspoon as well as the adherents of the Scottish Common Sense School of philosophy and then tosses in modern conservative Christian writers such as Mark Belies, Robert Healey Josh McDowell, Ray Comfort Lee Strobel and Revi Zacarias. All of these writers, Barton notes, accept the compatibility of reason and revelation. The implication that one is encouraged to derive is that the belief in the compatibility of reason and revelation was (and is) so widely shared an assumption that Jefferson can safely be assumed to have believed it himself, regardless of any particular words he might have put down on paper to the contrary.

Third, Barton continually shifts the discussion from whether or not Jefferson believed in revelation as a source of knowledge to the more general issue of whether he believed in God.

Barton says: “Jefferson’s bias in favor of his belief in God clearly comes through.” And again, “Jefferson was not being antireligious in his letter to Peter. He [Jefferson] definitely held a strong, personal pro-God position.”

Having thus established that Jefferson was indeed religious (a fact that no serious historian has ever questioned) Barton then argues that Jefferson’s rejection of revelation therefore actually proves him to be in a certain sense even more devout than those who do accept revelation as a source of knowledge. As Barton says:

“Jefferson was so thoroughly convinced that the existence of God was so self-evident and irrefutable that it could be easily proved even apart from the scriptures.”

Taken as a whole, Barton’s analysis is actually a *mélange* of three different and basically incompatible arguments

- That Jefferson didn’t really mean what he said about revelation; he was just playing Devil’s advocate to help strengthen his cousin’s faith.
- That Jefferson did indeed mean what he said but that his rejection of revelation proves that he was in a certain sense more devout than people who do rely on the scriptures.
- That Jefferson probably did not really see any conflict between reason and revelation since many of his contemporaries considered the two to be compatible.

For Barton, It is not fatal that these three arguments are incompatible. What matters is that one emerges from the chapter with the impression that Jefferson’s unorthodox opinions about revelation have somehow been reviewed and determined to be relatively inconsequential.

2. Jefferson's Rejection of the Divinity of Christ

As with the first issue, it is worth beginning by examining what Jefferson actually said:

In an 1820 letter Jefferson wrote:

*That Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the son of God, physically speaking, I have been convinced by the writings of men more learned than myself.*¹³

In the previously noted letter to his cousin he similarly suggests that the young man decide between:

*...the opposite pretensions [regarding Jesus] 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.*¹⁴

Jefferson indicates his own view of this question by advising his cousin to "Keep your reason firmly on the watch in... this inquiry."

As with revelation, Barton offers several different and incompatible arguments to minimize the significance of Jefferson's impious view.

First, Barton quickly shifts the debate from whether Jefferson accepted the divinity of Jesus to the quite different question of whether or not Jefferson was "pro-Jesus." Barton begins the chapter as follows:

"There was never a time when [Jefferson] questioned the overall value of Christianity to individuals or to a nation and there was never a time when he was anti-Jesus or rejected Christianity. It is only in the nuances of some particular doctrines of Christianity that Jefferson's personal faith becomes difficult to pin down."

A quite substantial number of devout conservative Christians will gag and turn bright purple at the notion that rejecting the divinity of Christ can be dismissed as a "nuance of some particular doctrine" but throughout the entire chapter on this subject Barton continually conflates Jefferson's rejection of Jesus' divinity with his admiration and adherence to Jesus moral and ethical teachings. This allows Barton to repeatedly characterize Jefferson by using the peculiar phrase "pro-Jesus" which completely muddles the distinction between Jefferson's support for Jesus' teachings and his refusal to believe in his divinity,

In fact, in the middle of the chapter Barton does present two quotes where Jefferson makes this key distinction quite clear – (1) where Jefferson says "I am a real Christian, that is to say a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus" and (2) "I am a Christian in the only sense in which He [Jesus] wished anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others."¹⁵ Barton also notes that during his last 15 years Jefferson never referred to the "Messiah, the Savior or the Christ".

But when Barton reaches his conclusion, he rapidly returns to his peculiar “*pro-Jesus*” versus “*anti-Jesus*” terminology and argues that the quotes above really just prove Jefferson was religious, not that he necessarily rejected the divinity of Jesus. As Barton says:

[Jefferson] regularly expressed his personal affinity for the teachings of Jesus and frequently referenced the bible in his own writing.... The condition of Jefferson’s private personal theology and Christian faith in his last years might be questioned but what cannot be questioned is the fact that throughout his life Jefferson was pro-Christian and pro-Jesus in his beliefs, demeanor and public endeavors.

Thus, if we untangle the chapter, we once again find that Barton has provided three different and incompatible views:

- That Jefferson should be considered a Christian because he admired Jesus and accepted Jesus doctrines.
- That if indeed Jefferson did not believe in Jesus’ divinity this was either a minor matter of the “*nuances of some particular doctrines*” or it was a quirk of the last few years of his life.
- That Jefferson was “pro-Jesus” and “pro-Christian” and that modern American religious conservatives should accept this as being substantially equivalent to being an avowed Christian.

3. Jefferson’s attempt to make a distinction between ethical principles and religious doctrines in American society and particularly in education.

Jefferson firmly felt that the new American nation needed a foundation of moral and ethical principles as the basis for its social and political life but that these basic principles could be clearly separated from specific religious doctrines and sectarian dogmas. Here is how he expressed the view:

Every religion consists of moral precepts and of dogmas. In the first they all agree: all forbid us to murder, steal, plunder, bear false witness and so on and these are the articles necessary for the preservation of order, justice and happiness in society. In their particular dogmas all differ, no two professing the same. These respect vestments, ceremonies, physical opinions and metaphysical speculations are totally unconnected with morality and unimportant to the legitimate objects of society.... The interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree and that we should not meddle 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.¹⁶

In designing the curriculum of the University of Virginia, Jefferson applied this approach as follows:

In conformity with the principles of our constitution, which places all sects of religion on an equal footing... and with the sentiments of the legislature in favor of freedom of religion...we have proposed no professor of divinity...the proofs of the being of god...

the author of all the relations of morality and of the laws and obligations these infer, will be within the province of the professor of ethics; to which adding the development of those moral obligations of those in which all sects agree..."¹⁷

As with the previous issues, Barton provides several different rationalizations for Jefferson's apparently secular approach. First he argues that despite the absence of a professor of divinity the college did indeed encourage religion. They had bibles in the library and taught ancient languages so that students could study the bible firsthand. Second, he argues that providing the churches of all faiths equal access to the students, although not directly through the academic curriculum, actually encouraged religion even more than if the university had been completely controlled by one denomination that would have inculcated only its own particular view.

4. Jefferson Despised Priests and the Bible

Barton devotes two chapters of his book to defending Jefferson from the "lies" that he hated the Bible and despised the clergy. In regard to the first, one unique expression of Jefferson's attempt to separate the ethical teachings of Christianity from supernatural beliefs were his efforts to do his own editing of the bible to produce a version that just presented Jesus' moral and ethical teachings while eliminating the sections that dealt with specific doctrines or supernatural events.

Barton argues that (1) Jefferson's "Bible" was merely a kind of personal Cliff Notes that he intended and created only for his own private use (although in fact, Jefferson sought several times to publish it anonymously), (2) that his edited version didn't fully exclude supernatural events and (3) that many devout people of Jefferson's era studied Jesus' morals and ethics as a distinct subject so that cutting up the bible to extract such excerpts had no anti-religious significance.

Barton also devotes an entire chapter to the question of whether Jefferson hated the clergy. Jefferson's anti-clerical remarks were frequent and were aimed at the clergy of many eras and denominations. Among other quotes, two that are frequently noted are *"In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own."* And *"History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government."*¹⁸

Barton's defense of Jefferson basically asserts once again that Jefferson didn't really mean what he said. Barton argues that Jefferson had many clergymen as friends and collaborators and thus could not have actually "hated" all clerics. Barton also argues that Jefferson was deeply emotionally shaken by the vicious attacks of his political opponents in the election of 1800 and by the tragic death of his wife and that, in consequence, his anti-clerical statements can be viewed as emotional outbursts rather than considered judgments.

When one finishes Barton's book, steps back and views the argument as a whole, the effect of the various inconsistent defenses and constantly shifting rationalizations is ultimately mind-numbing. Barton makes no attempt to provide a logical and coherent picture of Jefferson's religious philosophy. What he provides instead is an arsenal of separate

defenses and rationalizations designed to smooth over and minimize any elements of Jefferson's perspective that are inconsistent with the image of him as an entirely conventional and pious Christian.

For many people there will be a strong temptation to dismiss Barton's book as an unimportant "fringe" argument that professional historians and political thinkers need not take seriously. After all, Barton essentially ignores the views of all the standard sources on Jefferson's religious philosophy, he creates a straw man that few professional historians will take seriously and he presents a view of Jefferson as essentially a conventional and devout Christian that virtually no other major Jefferson scholar will endorse.

But it would be a profound error to underestimate the destructive influence of Barton's deeply deceptive portrait of Jefferson. Within the alternative culture of conservative Christianity—one that includes thousands of Churches and hundreds of Christian academies across America and millions of home-schooled children—Barton's book will quickly become the "definitive" work on Jefferson—one that his readers will accept as proving that literally all academic historians are bald-faced, cynical liars and that Thomas Jefferson was essentially a conservative Christian very much like themselves. On this basis, they will feel entirely justified and comfortable in rejecting all serious histories of Jefferson out of hand and dismissing all mainstream explanations of his religious philosophy as cynical atheist propaganda that has been "*completely and totally refuted*" by Barton's book.

Barton himself very forcefully encourages this interpretation of his work. The entire first chapter of "*the Jefferson Lies*" is taken up with an attack on all academic historians for a litany of sins including "*Deconstructionism,*" "*Poststructuralism,*" "*Modernism,*" "*Minimalism*" and "*Academic Collectivism.*" In his final chapter he issues a literal "call to arms" to young religious conservatives to learn from his example of how to fight back against the academic liars and cynical propagandists for atheism.

Opponents of Barton's profoundly distorted approach to history, however, should also carefully study and understand his method. In essence, it consists in the following:

- Ignore the major scholarly works and standard interpretations of a historical figure. Create instead a straw man so flamboyantly and vastly inaccurate that it can be easily and utterly refuted.
- Throw vast quantities of unconnected facts and inconsistent arguments against the straw man in order to overwhelm it by the sheer volume of evidence rather than by the evidence's quality, logical consistency or relevance.
- Note briefly the real debates and issues that are involved in regard to a particular individual but dismiss them as relatively minor and inconsequential matters when viewed in comparison to the much greater distortions embedded in the straw man.

In fact, Barton's approach is really the historical equivalent of the stage magicians' classic art of *misdirection*—the twirling of a shiny black and red cape that dramatically sweeps in front of the table or the release of a sudden puff of white smoke behind which a rabbit magically disappears.

Seen from this perspective, Barton's book is indeed impressive, but as a work of literary stage magic rather than history. Barton's book is ultimately a formidable exhibition of the illusionist's art. With the rhetorical equivalent of swirling capes and puffs of smoke, Barton's book succeeds in making the unique religious philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, one the most extraordinary of America's founding fathers, almost completely disappear.

¹ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Jefferson2.pdf

² Eugene Sheridan, *Jefferson and Religion*, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Monticello, 1998. p 18.

³ Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: a Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*, William Erdmans Publishing Co. , Michigan 1996. p 37

⁴ Lenni Brenner, Editor. *Jefferson and Madison on the Separation of Church and State: Writings on Religion and Secularism*. Barricade Books, Fort Lee, NJ, p. 339

⁵ Brenner p. 39

⁶ Brenner p. 98

⁷ Gaustad p. 67

⁸ Brenner p. 195

⁹ <http://www.wnd.com/2002/06/14285/>

¹⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/27/weekinreview/27vinciguerra.ART.html?pagewanted=all>

¹¹ Brenner p. 86

¹² Brenner p. 369

¹³ Brenner p. 339

¹⁴ Brenner p. 86

¹⁵ <http://www.faithofourfathers.net/jefferson.html>

¹⁶ Brenner p. 195

¹⁷ Robert M. Healy, *Jefferson on Religion in Public Education*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962. p. 19

¹⁸ Brenner pp. 215 and 224