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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S
RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY:

A PROFOUND AND INSPIRING
PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE TO
RICK SANTORUM
AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:
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A PROFOUND AND INSPIRING PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE TO RICK SANTORUM AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT.**

By ANDREW LEVISON

Introduction

In recent weeks Rick Santorum has suddenly brought into the mainstream national political debate a series of core ideas of the religious right that had previously been confined to the conservative religious community. Santorum shocked many commentators with the statements that he believed that the Christian faithful were literally in a “spiritual war” with secular society, that John Kennedy’s 1960 speech supporting the constitutional separation of church and state made him “want to throw up” and that not only Barack Obama but most mainstream Christian denominations had actually ceased to be genuinely Christian.

For the most part the national media tended to view Santorum’s remarks as indeed quite shocking but at the same time as also a basically unconnected succession of individual “gaffes” or “blunders” emerging from his idiosyncratic personal philosophy. But when several of Santorum’s major speeches to conservative Catholic audiences during the last two years are examined more carefully, a clear underlying pattern emerges. All of Santorum’s recent remarks actually reflect a coherent theological outlook that is extremely widespread among the millions of Americans who consider themselves part of the broad religious right and who believe that America can and should become an avowedly Christian nation.

There are three major planks in this theological perspective:

- That there is literally a “spiritual war” between contemporary science and the university on the one hand and religion and Christian faith on the other.
- That the right to “free exercise” of religion means that there should be no legal barriers imposed between church and state and that the Christian majority’s right to the free exercise of religion must be granted absolute priority over any protections of the rights of religious minorities.
- That Christian faith is the indispensable foundation for moral values and any just and decent society.

Progressives have strongly challenged these views but, characteristically, have focused on refuting specific facts and concepts. They have focused particularly on defending the doctrine of separation of church and state and arguing that Santorum simply misunderstood what Kennedy said and what the doctrine actually means.

This argument over the facts is certainly indispensable but it is also by itself insufficient to provide an effective alternative to the conservative view. What Santorum has provided for the religious right is a “flesh and blood” political advocate who clearly champions their basic

perspective and a passionate narrative that justifies their position. To effectively challenge Santorum, progressives need an equally compelling political advocate and passionate narrative of their own.

Progressives can find both of these requirements in the religious philosophy of Thomas Jefferson. Although Jefferson is generally known simply as the author of the Declaration of Independence and of the doctrine of separation of church and state, his full religious philosophy is vastly richer and deeper. At base it consists of three propositions—each of which clearly and directly challenges and contradicts the basic notions of the contemporary religious right. In his life and writings Jefferson upheld three basic principles:

- That science and religion are compatible.
- That freedom of religion, on the one hand, and religious tolerance on the other are equally important and interdependent cornerstones of the American ethos and that it is impossible to advocate an unlimited right to the free exercise of religion without profoundly undermining the fundamental American values of religious tolerance, individual freedom, liberty and individual rights.
- That society can uphold basic moral values without endorsing the specific doctrines or beliefs of any particular church or religion.

In the following sections, after briefly outlining Santorum's religious views, these three "Jeffersonian" principles will be outlined in detail. Taken together, they provide the basis for progressives to "push back" against Santorum's theology—and to successfully win the support of the American people.

Santorum's Religious Views

Behind the controversial quotes that appeared in the media in late February, there are two major speeches that Santorum delivered, one at the Ave Maria University in Florida¹ and the other at the University of St. Thomas in Houston Texas². These two speeches provide a more robust and nuanced view of his theological views and taken together with his public statements on the campaign trail make it possible to summarize Santorum's basic theological ideas with a series of direct quotations:

1. That universities are actually indoctrination camps that brainwash students against religion.

"I understand why Barack Obama wants to send every kid to college, because of their indoctrination mills, absolutely... The indoctrination that is going on at the university level is a harm to our country...62 percent of kids who go into college with a faith commitment leave without it,"³

2. That scientists are inherently immoral because of their lack of religious faith.

"Most scientists unfortunately, those that certainly are advocating for this (embryonic stem cell research), and many others feel very little moral compulsion. It's a utilitarian, materialistic view of doing whatever they can do to pursue their desired goals."⁴

Scientists will go wherever they want to go because they don't feel any moral constraints.

3. That the Christian faithful are literally in a spiritual war with scientists and the university

This is not a political war at all. This is not a cultural war. This is a spiritual war. And the Father of Lies has his sights on what you would think the Father of Lies would have his sights on: a good, decent, powerful, influential country—the United States of America. If you were Satan, who would you attack in this day and age.... The place where he was, in my mind, the most successful and first successful was in academia. He understood pride of smart people. He attacked them at their weakest, that they were, in fact, smarter than everybody else and could come up with something new and different. Pursue new truths, deny the existence of truth, play with it because they're smart. And so academia, a long time ago, fell.⁵

4. That the principle of separation of church and state—which John Kennedy defended in his 1960 speech as designed to prevent the church from dictating government policy—actually implies driving religion and the faithful completely out of public life.

Ultimately Kennedy's attempt to reassure Protestants that the Catholic Church would not control the government and suborn its independence advanced a philosophy of strict separation that would create a purely secular public square cleansed of all religious wisdom and the voice of religious people of all faiths.

...Kennedy's error also unleashed a new form of censorship that would make vows to the Almighty a constitutional offense, rob clergy of their First Amendment rights and deprive our leaders and our country of their inspired wisdom and guidance.⁶

5. That freedom of religious expression need not and should not be limited in any way in order to safeguard the rights of religious minorities.

The First Amendment says the free exercise of religion. That means bringing everybody, people of faith and no faith, into the public square... Our founders believed that if they fostered religion and the Judeo-Christian moral code we would achieve something that was never before seen in a country with so many competing faiths—a truly tolerant, democratic and harmonious public square.

On June 12, 1775, Congress' first act was to urge a national day of "public humiliation, fasting and prayer" for which it commissioned "ministers of the gospel of all denominations" to participate. On the assigned day, Congress attended services at an Anglican Church in the morning and a Presbyterian meetinghouse in the afternoon. The following year they convened at Philadelphia's "Roman Chapel" and later a Dutch Lutheran Church.

This is the vision. A vibrant, fully clothed public square; a marketplace of believers and non-believers where truth could be proffered and reasoned, and differences civilly tolerated.⁷

It is important to observe that in this quote Santorum does not seem to notice that neither non-Christians nor nonbelievers had any recognized place in this state-sanctioned "Christians only" public square. In fact, his basic view is that non-Christians should not expect to receive any recognized position or protected status in the public square by virtue of being religious

minorities but should rather accept that they will simply be granted permission to express their views. Asked in interview “What should we do with all the non-Christians in this country,” Santorum replied:

Come into the public square. Come to my town hall meetings, as people have done, and disagree with me and let's have a discussion. Let's air your ideas, let's bring them in, let's explain why you believe what you believe and what you think is best for the country. People of faith, people of no faith, people of different faith, that's what America is all about, it's bringing that diversity into and challenge of the different ideas that motivate people in our country.⁸

6. That Christian faith is the only viable foundation for moral values and a just society.

Far from reflecting hostility toward religion, our founders, rooted in their own faith convictions, knew that faith was not just an essential element, but the essence of civilization and the inspiration of culture...

In his Regensburg address, Pope Benedict XVI ...discussed those societies which would attempt to live without God, as in secular Europe or Communist China. In the secular West, he said, "...the subjective "conscience" becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter."

Santorum quotes John Henry Newman to the effect that "without religious foundation "conscience" becomes a license to take up any or no religion ... to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them... Without some objective moral touchstone, conscience is no more than self indulgence."⁹

Taken together these ten quotes combine to create a coherent argument for the view that America was always intended to be an avowedly Christian nation and should now become a country where no formal barriers exist between church and state. It is a view that can be summarized in the three propositions already noted above:

- That there is literally a “spiritual war” between contemporary science and the university on the one hand and religion and Christian faith on the other.
- That the right to “free exercise” of religion means that there should be absolutely no legal separation imposed between church and state and that the Christian majority’s right to the free exercise of religion must be granted absolute priority over any protections of the rights of religious minorities.
- That Christian faith is the indispensable foundation for moral values and any just and decent society.

Although Santorum brings a distinctly Catholic sensibility to his religious conservatism, his views are by no means specific to conservative Catholicism. On the contrary, they are widely shared core convictions of the predominantly Protestant religious right and are among the most deeply and passionately held views of the millions of ordinary grass-roots Christian conservatives.

Thomas Jefferson's Religious Philosophy

Among liberals and progressives, when Thomas Jefferson's religious views are discussed, he is generally remembered as the author of the first amendment and also as the most important advocate and champion of the notion of a "high wall of separation" between church and state, a concept that became an important element in a series of significant Supreme Court decisions on church-state relations after World War II.

Religious conservatives, on the other hand, find Jefferson the most difficult figure to fit into their revisionist history that portrays the founding fathers as all devout Christians seeking to create a nation based on biblical law. Jefferson presents a particularly difficult problem because they want to use the Declaration of Independence, of which Jefferson was the principal author, as the legal and historical basis for their claim that the founding fathers intended America to be governed as a Christian nation. As one recent article about the leading religious right historian David Barton explained:

[Barton] makes the case that the founders intended the Declaration of Independence—which speaks of men being "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights"—to be the foundation of American government, rather than the secular Constitution. What this means, Barton argues, is that our nation is meant to be governed according to the "God-given moral law" laid out in the Bible, with democratic process reserved for less weighty matters, like traffic violations.¹⁰

As a result, when Barton comes to discussing Jefferson, he attempts to avoid criticizing him directly. He argues, for example, that that "Compared to today's secularists, (Jefferson and Franklin) look like a bible thumping evangelists" and offers as evidence the fact that "even Jefferson signed letters "in the year of our Lord"¹¹ Similarly, in his book "Ten Tortured Words" about the "wall of separation" metaphor, Stephen Mansfield argues that while Jefferson was indeed a deist in his youth, after 1793 he had a "conversion" and became "a real Christian."¹²

Other religious conservatives, however, are more forthright in condemning Jefferson. They note that while he was not an atheist, he explicitly and repeatedly asserted that he did not believe in the divinity of Christ. As a result, they categorically reject him.

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."¹³ 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."*¹⁴

The truth about Thomas Jefferson's religious philosophy, however, is far more profound and valuable than either of these superficial characterizations. Throughout his life, Jefferson consistently championed three fundamental ideas about religion.

- First, Jefferson did not believe that there was or could be any genuine conflict between science and religion. In his view the scientific method and scientific investigation were profoundly devout spiritual activities whose goal was the discovery of a truth that was fundamentally religious in nature. Jefferson's private and public writings reveal him as both a passionate advocate of science and also a deeply religious man.
- Second, although best known for advocating the "wall of separation" between church and state, the heart of Jefferson's philosophy of religion was actually his championing of two more fundamental ideals—freedom of religion and religious tolerance. It was Jefferson, more than any of the other founding fathers, who elevated these mutually supporting and interdependent values into a fundamental part of the American ethos, deeply intertwined with the basic American ideals of freedom, liberty and individual rights.
- Third, while Jefferson opposed the imposition of any specific religious beliefs, he also firmly believed in society's obligation to uphold fundamental moral values, particularly for educating the young. But Jefferson emphatically distinguished between basic moral principles and values—which he believed were shared by all major religions—and the specific doctrines, dogmas and beliefs on which all disagreed. Jefferson believed that society could successfully endorse and promote a set of basic moral values while also remaining strictly neutral regarding specific doctrines and practices of different faiths.

Taken together, these three ideas, each richly and eloquently expressed in Jefferson's writings, provide the intellectual and emotional core of a profoundly compelling defense of America's traditional commitment to religious liberty and consistent rejection of an established national religion.

But Jefferson also offers something more. His passionate struggle against religious oppression and tyranny was not simply an abstract intellectual odyssey but a powerfully emotional human drama. At the heart of Jefferson's life was the ardent crusade of a man who, more than any of the other founding fathers, embodied, championed and fiercely defended a new vision and set of ideals about the place of religion in society—a set of ideals that have become the core of what most Americans now intuitively understand as a uniquely valuable and worthwhile "American Way."

Jefferson's views about Science and Religion

Jefferson's religious philosophy took shape during his years as a student of law at the College of William and Mary. He was exposed to the "New Learning" of the European Enlightenment by several of his professors who, as he said, "probably fixed the destinies of my life."¹⁵

A central part of Jefferson's emerging world view was a profound appreciation of science and the scientific method. Throughout his public life, Jefferson consistently described Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton as two of the greatest men who ever lived and said that while politics was his "duty", science was his "passion."

As today, traditional theologians looked on science with suspicion. But Newton, Bacon and Jefferson were actually profoundly religious men who perceived science and the scientific method not as a rejection of religion but as the most powerful tool available for seeking a truth that was ultimately religious in nature.

One of the most dramatic examples of this Enlightenment view was provided by the discovery of the laws of planetary motion. Beginning in 1576, the astronomer Tycho Brahe devoted over 20 years of his life to carefully recording the exact positions of the planets and stars using new telescopes that provided vastly more precise data than previously available. In 1600, one of his assistants, Johannes Kepler, became convinced that he could find mathematical laws that explained Brahe's data by assuming that the Earth revolved around the sun. Kepler explored thousands of possibilities until he discovered three mathematical equations so remarkably simple that each could be expressed in a single English sentence.

To Jefferson and other students of the enlightenment, the fact that the vastly complex and seemingly chaotic motion of the planets could be reduced to this stunningly simple set of rules seemed compelling proof of an underlying order and logic in the universe. They did not imagine these laws as simply random or accidental. They saw them as quite literally the word of God and the laws of God, embedded in the very fabric of the universe and revealed to man by his reason and the scientific method. As one biographer noted, "Jefferson and the other deists of the eighteenth century believed that Nature spoke the language of God."¹⁶

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.

Gravity was not a property of matter: it was God's law for the orderly operation of matter, one of the means by which he brought order out of chaos.¹⁷

This view of scientific laws as the expressions of a divine power and science as a spiritual and religious quest has always been widely shared by working scientists. Bacon and Newton held this religious philosophy and, in the 20th century, two of its most notable exponents were Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking.

This view, however, had one key implication. Having created these universal and fundamental laws of nature, Jefferson and other scientifically minded thinkers of the enlightenment did not believe that God would then frivolously violate them; any more than God would violate his own ethical commandments. Thus, for Jefferson, those accounts in the Bible which contradicted the laws of nature had to be viewed with extreme skepticism. In a famous letter to his cousin, Peter Carr, giving him advice on how to evaluate the bible, Jefferson clearly expressed his perspective:

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...¹⁸

In other personal letters and in his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson used similar methods of scientific reasoning to reject the biblical accounts of the age of the earth and the great flood as literal truths. Yet, in his mind, none of these conclusions represented a rejection of religion itself. Rather, he saw them as affirming that true “word” of God—a “word” was to be found in God’s “works”—in the natural laws God had embedded in the fabric of creation—rather than in the accounts written long ago by human beings and collected in the bible.

In a letter to the former President John Adams Jefferson made his basic religious perspective quite clear:

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; the structure of our earth itself, with its distribution of lands, waters, and atmosphere; animal and vegetable bodies, each perfectly organized whether as insect, man or mammoth; 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.¹⁹

The three key elements in Jefferson’s scientifically-based view of theology are clearly evident in this passage—a rejection of revelation and biblical literalism as the ultimate source of knowledge, a belief that scientific laws were most authentic expression of God’s design and a vision of scientific inquiry as an inspiring quest for religious truth. The result is that, in Jefferson’s perspective, there was not (and in fact could never be) a genuine conflict between science and religion.*

It is, in fact, impossible to read the hundreds of statements Jefferson made about religion without recognizing the deep and sincere nature of his religious feelings. Yet at the same time it is impossible to question his absolute dedication to science and the scientific method. To any modern reader, Jefferson’s writings reveal him as both a passionate advocate of science and also a deeply religious man.

**Contemporary advocates of “intelligent design” have used an edited version of the quote above—a version that carefully omits Jefferson’s rejection of revelation in favor of the scientific method—to claim him as an advocate of their position.*

Yet, in fact, Jefferson’s view was the actually the precise opposite of contemporary intelligent design. As seen above, Jefferson emphatically rejected revelation as a source of scientific truth and he considered the “argument from design” (as it was called in the 17th century) a “metaphysical speculation” that was part of philosophy and not a scientific theory. In his plan for the curriculum of the University of Virginia, Jefferson assigned the teaching of the “argument from design” to the professor of ethics and philosophy, not the professor of astronomy or science. (Continued next page.)

Jefferson's views about Religious Freedom and Tolerance

Although Jefferson is best remembered today as the leading advocate of the “separation between Church and State”, the notion of separation was not, in fact, the core of his philosophy. The actual quote where the phrase appears, in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, shows that separation was not for Jefferson a moral principle in itself, but rather a means for protecting other more fundamental individual rights. As Jefferson wrote:

“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 legitimate 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.”²¹

In fact, at the center of Jefferson's philosophy of religion were two fundamental principles. The first was what is today usually called “freedom of religion” or “religious freedom” but which in Jefferson's era was more accurately labeled “freedom of conscience”, a broader term that more clearly embraces all forms of sincere spiritual faith and not just the doctrines of established churches. The second principle was “religious tolerance”, a commitment to respect all forms of religious faith and reject any means other than reasoned persuasion to convince people to alter them. These are two values that have become a fundamental part of the American ethos, deeply intertwined with the basic American ideals of freedom, liberty and individual rights.

Jefferson's profound dedication to the principle of freedom of religion derived from his view that each individual's right to freely search for spiritual truth was an inherent and inalienable natural right—a right as fundamental to liberty as freedom of speech, the press or assembly. The mind must remain free, Jefferson argued: “No man can form his faith to the dictates of another... The essence of religion consists in the internal persuasion of the mind.”²²

From this perspective, any attempt to impose religious views represented an act of tyranny. When this tyranny was perpetrated by government—whether by imposing taxes to support religion, requiring religious tests for public office or decreeing government-sanctioned prayers or ritual observances—it inevitably represented a violation of every citizen's fundamental freedoms 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”²³ Requiring individuals to participate in public prayers or ceremonies against their will was equally “sinful and tyrannical” in his view.

Contemporary intelligent design, in contrast, attempts to re-label the classical argument from design as an actual scientific theory (rather than as a metaphysical or philosophic conjecture) and then formulates it in a way specifically aimed at discrediting a particular group of actual scientific theories in order to open the way for explanations based on divine revelation.

A somewhat similar attempt to subvert public education in Virginia actually led Jefferson to sarcastically remark that “the priests of the different religious sects...dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight”²⁰—a quote that certainly deserves to be included directly alongside the full text of Jefferson's letter to Adams in any instructional materials aimed at giving students an accurate sense of Jefferson's religious philosophy.

Christian conservatives have attempted to argue that Jefferson only intended the “wall of separation” to impose the most limited restraints on public religion—precluding government from favoring any particular sect or denomination, for example, but not from funding or authorizing support for Christianity in general. They similarly argue that Jefferson’s support for the “free exercise” of religion implied that he supported devout citizens’ right to essentially complete freedom to practice, disseminate and promote their religious beliefs.

But this is a fundamental misreading of Jefferson’s views. In his perspective, it was not only government, but “the tyranny of public opinion” that could and often did pose a massive threat to religious freedom and individual rights. Writing to the leader of the Synagogue of New York, Jefferson noted that: “Your sect by its suffering has furnished a remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance inherent in every sect ...although we are free by the law we are not so in practice. Public opinion erects itself in to an inquisition and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flames of an auto-da-fe.”²⁴

Jefferson expressed this concern about the “tyranny of public opinion” repeatedly throughout his life. In a letter written years earlier, he had denounced the “sectarian bigotry” that would “seduce public opinion to erect itself into that inquisition over the rights of conscience”²⁵ and in another letter he argued that public opinion would often raise “the howl and cry of heresy against [the holders of minority religious views], place them under the ban of public opinion and shut them out from all the kind affections of society”²⁶

Jefferson was particularly sensitive to the coercive and oppressive power of public opinion because his own religious convictions were under essentially constant attack during his entire public life. He recognized that because many religious sects inculcated a belief in the absolute truth of their particular faith and in a sacred obligation to convert others, the right of “free exercise” of religion could easily become distorted into a presumed right to mobilize the power of both government and public censure and disapproval against minority religious views.

The only way minority religious opinions could be protected from social coercion by the majority was through Jefferson’s second fundamental principle, religious tolerance—a society-wide commitment to respect the personal religious beliefs of others and to acknowledge non-coercive persuasion as the only proper way to attempt to change them. In one famous passage in his Notes on Virginia, Jefferson argued that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”²⁷ On another occasion he wrote, “while I claim a right to believe in one God, I yield as freely to others that of believing in three. Both religions, I find, make honest men, and that is the only point society has any right to look to.”²⁸

In practice, a fundamental right Jefferson wished to establish was the right to keep one’s religious beliefs and views a private matter and to deny the state or the “tyranny of public opinion” the right to demand that one explain or justify them. When asked by a correspondent to publicly explain his religious views, Jefferson replied: “Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone; its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if that has been dutiful to society the Religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.”²⁹ On another occasion he replied to a similar request by saying, “Religion is a subject on which I have ever been most scrupulously reserved. I have considered it as a matter between every man and his Maker in which no other, and far less the public, had a right to intermeddle.”³⁰

In coming to these conclusions, Jefferson was reacting to the history of extreme religious intolerance and persecution that marked the early days of the American colonies—a persecution that was enforced by both law and public opinion.

By the time Jefferson entered political life in the mid-1700's, population growth and migration had weakened the ability of the colonies to impose a specific church and doctrine on their inhabitants, but many still sought to make America a "Christian Nation." During the 1780's, a bill was introduced in Virginia that would effectively have made Christianity the official state religion. Under the bill, taxes would be collected from all citizens for distribution to "acceptable" Christian churches. Proponents argued that, although Christianity would be recognized as the state religion, the state would be "tolerant" of religious minorities.

As a practical matter, however, the promise of tolerance had little meaning. In South Carolina, which had established "Protestant Christianity" as the state's official religion in 1778, for a church to be recognized by the state, all church members were required to affirm (1) that "there is one Eternal God and a future State of rewards and punishments" (2) "that God was to be honored by public worship" (3) that "the Christian religion is the true religion" and (4) that "the Bible, both Old and New Testaments is divinely inspired."³¹

Similarly, in Delaware, anyone wishing to hold public office had to swear that, "I do profess faith in God the Father and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, one God blessed for evermore; and I do acknowledge the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration."³²

Jefferson, along with Madison and Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were profoundly opposed to the proposed Virginia law. They viewed it as a total betrayal of "spirit of '76." Although he was acting as Ambassador to France for part of this time, Jefferson played a leading role in opposing the Virginia bill.

The Virginia bill failed, opening the way for Madison to introduce a "Statute Establishing Religious Freedom" that Jefferson had drafted some years before. The legislation, which was passed in 1786, was a ringing, categorical affirmation of religious freedom and tolerance. It 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;

But that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."³³

Even 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."³⁴

Years later, Jefferson would point to the Virginia statute on Religious Freedom as one of his proudest accomplishments, an achievement he ranked on a level with his drafting of the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson's views about Moral Values and Religious Doctrines

The Virginia statute, however, had an additional consequence. It earned Jefferson bitter and undying hatred from the opponents of religious toleration. As a result, when Jefferson ran for President in 1800, he was assaulted by a vicious "smear" campaign that offered disturbing parallels to recent U.S. elections.

Jefferson was denounced as a "howling atheist and infidel." The president of Yale University asked, "[shall we] see the bible cast into a bonfire, the vessels of the sacramental supper borne by an ass in public profession, and our children... united in chanting mockeries against God?" The Federalist Newspaper called Jefferson "an enemy of pure morals and religion and consequently an enemy to his country and his God." Anyone who supports Jefferson, the paper continued "insults his maker and redeemer...what can screen such wretches from the just vengeance of insulted heaven?"³⁵

In the streets and the pulpits, the accusations were even more lurid and extreme. One federalist speaker said "If Jefferson is elected [then] those morals which protect our lives from the knife of the assassin, which guard the chastity of our wives and daughters from seduction and violence [will be lost]." Voters in New England were warned to hide their Bibles if Jefferson were elected (to avoid their confiscation) and ministers told their congregations wild stories of bizarre worship services at Jefferson's Monticello home where he supposedly prayed to the "Goddess of Reason" and offered up dogs on a sacrificial altar.³⁶

Jefferson won the 1800 election, but the campaign's legacy of bitterness and divisiveness deeply disturbed him. It seemed to him that the country was in serious danger of fracturing along social and religious lines. As Eugene Sheridan noted in his study *Jefferson and Religion*, Jefferson's overriding concern was "how to guarantee the perpetuation of republican government in the United States at a time when, as it seemed to him, political factionalism and social disharmony were threatening to undermine its basic foundations."³⁷

A major source of the division was religion. While Jefferson remained firmly opposed to the notion of making the U.S. an explicitly "Christian Nation", he did agree with the devout that the new nation needed a common set of moral and ethical principles, particularly for the education of the young.

Jefferson expressed his view as follows:

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.³⁸

In Jefferson's view these moral precepts were not just vague generalizations, but a concrete set of principles that could be formulated in an entirely specific way. Jefferson systematically reviewed every passage in the four gospels of the New Testament and extracted only those that expressed ethical lessons or portrayed Jesus' as a teacher of moral principles. In contrast, Jefferson carefully set aside those sections of the gospels that required the reader to accept matters of specific religious doctrine and faith such as the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the Trinity and the Resurrection. He combined these selections into two studies—"The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth" and "The Life and Morals of Jesus."

Jefferson was unwilling to publish either of the two works under his own name, but he made several attempts to have the first volume published anonymously or used as a reference by other authors. These attempts were unsuccessful, however, and neither volume appeared during Jefferson's lifetime.

The primary area where Jefferson wished to apply his distinction between moral principles and theological doctrines was in public education, a field in which he played a fundamental role.

In his bill establishing elementary education in Virginia, for example, Jefferson unambiguously insisted that "no religious reading, instruction, or exercise shall be prescribed or practiced inconsistent with the tenets of any religious sect or denomination."³⁹ Instead, Jefferson suggested that ethical principles could best be imparted through morally uplifting literature. He made specific recommendations regarding the kinds of stories the young should read to learn key values and virtues.

At the university level, Jefferson distinguished with equal firmness between the ethical principles of religion and the teaching of specific church doctrines. In his initial proposal for the organization of the University of Virginia, he expressed his views 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..."⁴⁰

Opposition from many of the other groups involved in the establishment of the university forced Jefferson to negotiate a complex series of compromises regarding the role of religion on the university campus, but his basic approach did not significantly change.

While Jefferson's initial motivation in insisting upon this careful and systematic separation between shared moral principles and divisive theological doctrines was to achieve a balance between the beliefs of religious Americans and the protection of individual rights, his research regarding the bible also led him to substantially revise his personal views regarding Jesus Christ.

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 not only convinced Jefferson that Jesus could be studied as a profound moral philosopher as well as a religious symbol, but also that Jesus' ethical views were fundamentally superior to the classical Greek and Roman philosophers he had admired as a student. 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 more flesh and blood, human figure behind the veil of church doctrine. It led him to clearly make the distinction between the Christianity of those who genuinely try to follow the personal example of Jesus, often outside the boundaries of the Church, and those who trumpet Church doctrine, but ignore Jesus' example.

And beyond this, as Charles Sanford noted in his Study *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Jefferson came to see Jesus as

...more than just a sage teacher of morals... Jesus was also a reformer of society, government and religious institutions. It was in Jesus' work of attempting to reform the moral institutions of his time, Jefferson wrote, that brought about his death... Jefferson summed up the life of Jesus in this way "according to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten and inform mankind, he fell an early victim to the jealousy of the altar and the throne, entrenched in power and riches."⁴¹

This vision of Jesus as a social reformer was quite original when Jefferson expressed it, since, as Sanford notes, "none of the other enlightenment writers and reformers stressed this idea." But, its subsequent influence can be traced through the long chain of progressive Christian theology from the Abolitionists and the "social gospel" of the progressive era to the contemporary theologies that focus on genuinely following the example of Christ's life and improving the condition of the poor and oppressed. In the recent history of the United States, the most profoundly influential and deeply "Jeffersonian" expression of this progressive religious view of Jesus Christ was, of course, reflected in the life and religious philosophy of Martin Luther King.

Even as Jefferson's view of Jesus evolved in his later years, however, his profound personal and philosophical antagonism toward the conservative religious leaders who had so viciously slandered him in the 1800 election continued unabated. In their refusal to recognize the importance of religious freedom and individual rights, he saw them as the spiritual descendants of the Puritan theocrats and European religious tyrants whose bigotry and intolerance had been responsible for a literally unimaginable amount of suffering and cruelty over the centuries.

In the midst of the bitter campaign of 1800, when Jefferson was grimly holding his public silence in the face of the vicious slanders being launched against him, he privately expressed his feelings in a letter to his friend Benjamin Rush:

“They (the conservative clergy) believe that any portion of power confided in me, will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly: for I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”⁴²

The last 20 words are those inscribed on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, and very appropriately so. They accurately capture not only the essence of Jefferson’s political philosophy during his lifetime, but, in their chosen target as well as their message, his most powerful relevance for today.

Conclusion

In their campaign to make America a more explicitly Christian nation, religious conservatives have succeeded in diverting the national debate away from America’s long traditions of religious freedom and tolerance and channeling it into a series of artificially polarized choices between extremes of religious faith and secularism.

- Religious conservatives have framed the relationship between science and religion as one that inescapably entails a forced choice between biblical literalism and revelation on the one hand or science and the scientific method on the other.
- Religious conservatives have framed the debate over the proper place of religion in American public life as a forced choice between a faith-based society that publicly honors and endorses the religious views of the Christian majority and a secular society that prohibits any expression of religion at all.
- Religious conservatives have framed the discussion over society’s need for moral values as requiring a forced choice between either teaching explicitly Christian doctrines or permitting nothing but a “naked public square”.

In this limited and artificial framework, the option of defending America’s traditional protection of individual freedom of conscience and religious tolerance simply disappears.

But Thomas Jefferson’s life and religious philosophy dramatically reinstates the missing alternative. Jefferson symbolizes the distinct American tradition of religious freedom and tolerance, an approach rooted in three related ideas.

- That science and religion are compatible.
- That freedom of religion and religious tolerance 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 endorsing the specific doctrines or beliefs of any particular church or religion.

Thomas Jefferson thus stands as a unique symbol for every person who upholds the traditional American ideals regarding the place and role of religion in America. His lifelong struggle for religious tolerance and freedom provides a moving narrative and compelling model for the defenders of those values today. Jefferson still remains, as he did during his lifetime, as the great champion and guardian of the deeply held American principles regarding religion that have defined our nation since its inception.

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Footnotes:

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- ² <http://www.phlmetropolis.com/santorums-houston-speech.php>
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- ⁵ <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/santorum-satan-systematically-destroying-america>
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- ¹⁵ Gaustad p. 16
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- ¹⁷ Gaustad p. 37
- ¹⁸ Brenner p.86
- ¹⁹ Brenner p.369
- ²⁰ Brenner p.335
- ²¹ Brenner 163
- ²² Brenner 27
- ²³ Brenner 49
- ²⁴ Brenner 269
- ²⁵ Brenner 168
- ²⁶ Brenner 374
- ²⁷ Brenner 54
- ²⁸ Brenner 366
- ²⁹ Brenner 253
- ³⁰ Brenner 206
- ³¹ Gaustad 56
- ³² Gaustad 57
- ³³ Peterson et. al. p. xviii
- ³⁴ http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions45.html
- ³⁵ Ferling p. 154
- ³⁶ Sheridan 22-23
- ³⁷ Sheridan 24
- ³⁸ Brenner 195
- ³⁹ Healey 19
- ⁴⁰ Ibid p. 217
- ⁴¹ Sanford 131, 137
- ⁴² Brenner p. 155