

Chapter 9

The climax of the American enlightenment: the Danbury Baptists, the ‘Jefferson Bible’, and

Jefferson’s last letter.

The Danbury Baptists

The parts of the *Notes on Virginia* that most offended Jefferson’s contemporaries are not those that most offend modern readers. His comments on male orangutans mating with black women went unremarked. But his proof that the shells on top of the Andes could not have been put there by Noah’s flood, and his celebrated statement that if his neighbor believed in twenty gods or no god, ‘[i]t neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg’ (see Documentary Appendix) both infuriated the orthodox. When he returned to active American politics in 1790, and for the rest of his life, he was attacked as an atheist, or scarcely less bad, a Deist, and one whose beliefs would destroy American society. These attacks climaxed during the bitter 1800 election and the whole of Jefferson’s first Presidential term, which also saw the first allegation in print that he had borne a child by Sally Hemings.

Jefferson never publicly replied to the attacks on his religious views. There would have been nothing to gain from doing so – the Federalists would simply have intensified the Hemings angle, and some of his own Republican side would have been scarcely less horrified by his views. Nevertheless, in private letters, public documents, and writings somewhat in between private and public, he revealed a great deal about his ethical views. This chapter deals with the three most important such sets of documents: the ‘Danbury Letter’; the ‘Syllabus’ which led Jefferson to make two sets of clippings from the New Testament Gospels which have become known as the ‘Jefferson Bible’; and his last ever published letter, addressed to the Mayor of Washington DC. All three documents are in the Documentary Appendix.

At the end of December 1801, President Jefferson received two gifts from New England, probably in the same package. One was a giant cheese made for him by his supporters in Cheshire, Massachusetts at the instance of his political ally the Baptist preacher John Leland. The accompanying message explained:

[We] believe the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, who raises up men to achieve great events, has raised up a Jefferson at this critical day, to defend Republicanism, and to baffle the arts of Aristocracy.

We wish to prove the love we bear to our President not by words alone, but in deed and in truth. With this Address we send you a Chees by the hands of Messrs. John Leland and Darius Brown, as a token of the esteem which we bear to our chief Magistrate....

The Chees was produced by the personal labor of Freeborn Farmers, with the voluntary and cheerful aid of their wives and daughters, without the assistance of a single slave....

N.B. The chees above mentioned was made July 20. 1801, and on the 20th of August it weighed 1235lb. ("To Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States of America. From the Committee of Cheshire, Massachusetts" received Dec. 30, 1801. In *PTJ* 36: 249-250).

It was a highly political cheese. Its sponsors had spent months traveling with it by river and sea, exciting Republican joy and Federalist scorn at every stop. Apparently, it was edible on

arrival and may have lasted as much as three years, although a Federalist eater found it “very far from being good” (*PTJ* 36: 248; Sen. William Plumer quoted by Freeman 2012: 157).

Leland wished to show that there were enthusiastic Republicans even in deeply Federalist New England. Although Republicans, their letter shows that they were distinctively *New England* Republicans. They celebrated Jefferson’s installation by God to defeat aristocracy; and they pointedly added that no slaves were involved in making the cheese. Presumably they ensured that only Republican cows were milked for it.

In his reply, Jefferson echoed their praise of the Constitution for its “prohibition of religious tests, and it’s means of peaceable amendment” (a reference, perhaps, to John Adams’ peaceful acceptance of his loss of the 1800 election). He made no mention of either God or slavery, beyond blessing the cheesemakers as “freeborn farmers, employed personally in the useful labors of life” (TJ to the Committee of Cheshire Massachusetts, Jan. 1. 1802, in *PTJ* 36: 252).

At the same time, probably also through Leland, Jefferson received a lighter document which enabled him to make a sharper political point. It was a petition from the Danbury Baptist Association, a group of churches in western Connecticut. It read in part:

[T]hough our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, Sir to believe, that none are more sincere.

Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty—That Religion is at all times and places a Matter between God and Individuals—That no man ought to suffer

in Name, person or effects on account of his religious Opinions—That the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbour: But Sir, our constitution of government is not specific. Our antient charter [viz., the Constitution of Connecticut – IM], together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted as the Basis of our government, At the time of our revolution; and such had been our Laws & usages, & such still are; that religion is consider'd as the first object of Legislation; & therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expence of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen ("The address of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut; assembled October 7th. 1801. To Thomas Jefferson Esqr: President of the united States of America". *PTJ* 35: 407-408. Original spelling and punctuation).

Jefferson seized the opportunity to echo the Danbury Baptists. By 'our constitution of government' they meant the Connecticut Constitution, which still provided for an established church. Jefferson sent a draft reply round to two New Englanders in his cabinet, explaining:

Averse to receive addresses, yet unable to prevent them, I have generally endeavored to turn them to some account, by making them the occasion by way of answer, of sowing useful truths & principles among the people, which might germinate and become rooted among their political tenets. the Baptist address now inclosed admits of a condemnation of the alliance between church and state, under the authority of the Constitution. it furnishes an occasion too, which I have long wished to find, of saying

why I do not proclaim fastings & thanksgivings, as my predecessors did. (TJ to Levi Lincoln, Jan. 1 1802, in *PTJ* 36: 256).

Jefferson went on to admit that it was a little awkward to use his reply as a peg on which to hang a rebuttal of presidential-sanctioned fasts and thanksgivings, as the petition did not mention them. Levi Lincoln, his Attorney-General, advised him to take out the passage about fasting, which contained a pointed reference to George III, and he did. He justified his refusal to follow the two previous presidents' proclamations of fasts in a letter to Samuel Miller in 1808:

I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct it's exercises, its discipline or its doctrines: nor of the religious societies that the General government should be invested with the power of effecting any uniformity of time or matter among them. fasting & prayer are religious exercises. the enjoining them an act of discipline, every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises & the objects proper for them according to their own particular tenets. and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the constitution has deposited it.

I am aware that the practice of my predecessors may be quoted. but I have ever believed that the example of State executives led to the assumption of that authority by the general government, without due examination.... (TJ to Samuel Miller, Jan. 23 1808, in Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7257>, accessed Jan. 02 2024)

The first sentence of the Letter to Miller echoes Madison's *Federalist* #10, and hence Smith's riposte to Hume: a state church is bad for the church as well as for the state.

Jefferson insisted, both to his Cabinet in 1802 and to Miller in 1808, that his views on fasts were not for publication. As with his draft of the Declaration of Independence however, it is Jefferson's draft rather than the final Danbury letter that is of greater interest as a guide to his thought and strategy.

The Danbury letter is completely consistent with his decades-earlier alliance with the Baptists of Virginia. The Baptists, together with the Quakers, were the most extreme advocates of the separation of church and state. In no state had the Baptists ever been the established church, probably because in no state were they the largest denomination when the state constitution was written. They also had theological objections to establishment, which they shared with the Presbyterians. Hence the Quakers were never the 'established' religion of Pennsylvania even though they founded the colony. Jefferson allied with the Baptists, although not with the Quakers, who he unfairly alleged were English agents because their movement was founded in England (TJ to William Baldwin, Jan. 19 1810 in *PTJ: RS* 2: 157-9). As John Bunyan was as English as Gorge Fox (although they hated each other), this was an odd claim to make. Perhaps Jefferson was annoyed by Quakers' refusal to bear arms during the Revolutionary War.

At one level, then, the Danbury letter is not at all surprising. It echoed what Jefferson had been saying about religious freedom since the 1770s, and largely (though not wholly) echoed back to the Danbury Baptists what they had said to him. It was a rather slow burner – despite

the care Jefferson had put into it, it did not get much press coverage to begin with, but after a while it was widely reprinted in local newspapers.

Why then is it one of the most important documents of Jefferson's life? Partly because he was a marvelous writer, although a poor speaker. Here is the core of the draft:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & 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.

[the word *their* underlined in the original].

The style resembles the Cicero whom the young Jefferson had studied intensively. No other US President has been remotely such a good writer except Abraham Lincoln. Despite recent efforts to find parallels in earlier writing on religious toleration, especially by Roger Williams of Rhode Island, the 'wall of separation' was a striking new image. (For a taster of the huge literature on the Danbury letter, far beyond the scope of this discussion, see, e.g., Hutson 1998; 1999; O'Neil 1999; Dreisbach 2002; Hamburger 2002; Neem 2007; Ragosta 2013, 2021; Meyerson 2015).

Moreover, for 150 years the letter has been at the heart of American jurisprudence as to the meaning of the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment, which themselves proceed directly from Jefferson's and Madison's efforts in Virginia. . In *Reynolds*

v. United States, (1878), 98 U.S. 145, the first case in which the Supreme Court decided in favor of a 'wall of separation', Chief Justice Waite misread 'legitimate powers of government' as 'legislative powers of government', thus restricting the generality of Jefferson's claim. The high point of Supreme Court reliance on the Danbury letter came in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) 330 U.S. 1, by which time the Fourteenth Amendment had extended the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses to the states. Confusingly, it was a 5-4 split decision. For the majority, Justice Hugo Black proclaimed

The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this:

Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between Church and State.' [...] The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable (*Everson* at 15-16)

The issue in *Everson* was whether it was constitutionally permissible for the State of New Jersey to reimburse parents for the cost of sending their children to private school. The

majority found that this did not breach the wall of separation; the minority found that it did – hence the minority was even more strenuously Jeffersonian than the majority.

In recent years, conservative litigators and judges have tried to take bricks down from the wall. Too often this relies on what has aptly been called ‘law office history’, where advocates cherry-pick the record for support for a view that they have already decided they support. (For examples see, e.g., Ragosta 2013, ch. 5 *passim*; Ragosta 2021). This book does not go down that rabbit hole, as I focus on what the wall of separation meant to *Jefferson*. The clue comes further on in the Danbury letter:

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

Modern readers may easily miss Jefferson’s intended meaning. He is encouraging the Danbury Baptists to campaign for disestablishment in Connecticut (which happened in 1818). Only then, he says, will they be in full possession of their natural rights to come to their own religious views. This is what links the Danbury letter to the next episode: the so-called Jefferson Bible.

Jefferson made two sets of clippings from the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. He entitled the first ‘The Philosophy of Jesus’ and the second, ‘The Life and Morals of Jesus’ Following Adams 1983, I label them *PJ* and *LJ* in this section.

Physically, *PJ* has been lost, but Adams (1983) reconstructed it from ghostly evidence and from Jefferson’s later letters. In old age, he wrote:

I made, for my own satisfaction, an Extract from the Evangelists of the texts of his morals, selecting those only whose style and spirit proved them genuine, and his own: and they are as distinguishable from the matter in which they are imbedded as diamonds in dunghills. a more precious morsel of ethics was never seen. it was too hastily done however, being the work of one or two evenings only, while I lived at Washington, overwhelmed with other business: and it is my intention to go over it again at more leisure.. (TJ to F. Van der Kemp, Apr. 25 1816: *PTJ:RS* 9: 703).

The ‘other business’ was the small matter of being the third President of the United States.

The compilation of *PJ* started with a ‘Syllabus of an Estimate of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus, compared with those of others’. Jefferson sent it to two of his interlocutors, the Philadelphia physician and politician Benjamin Rush and the Unitarian scientist Joseph Priestley, in the hope that one of them might carry out the task. Jefferson was rather busy trying to negotiate a peace treaty with Great Britain (TJ to B. Rush with enclosure, Apr. 21, 1803; *PTJ* 40: 251-4).

The *Syllabus*, together with the table of contents of *PJ* and the actual choices made by Jefferson in his two selections, set out Jefferson's ethical view as it had evolved to 1803. Rush declined because the *Syllabus* showed to his satisfaction that Jefferson was not a Christian (Adams 1983: 25-6). Priestley was old and ill, and would die in February 1804. So President Jefferson decided to do the job himself. He ordered two copies of a Dublin edition of the 'Authorized' (King James) Version (cheaper than London editions because not protected by copyright) and started to make clippings of the texts that he thought presented the 'genuine' Jesus. He needed two copies because it was possible that a clipping might remove material from the back of the leaf, which he also needed. As his later letter confirms, he worked very quickly. The copies arrived on 4 February 1804 and the finished product was bound on 10 March (Adams 1983: 27). The mutilated Authorized Version copies survive, and are therefore a source from which the ghostly clippings can be reconstructed. There also survive a copy title page and list of contents. These were copied, probably by one of Jefferson's granddaughters, perhaps around 1820. The originals are lost.

The copy title page reads:

The Philosophy/of Jesus of Nazareth / extracted from the accounts of his life and doctrines as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John / being an abridgement of the New Testament for the use of the Indians unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions (Facsimile in Adams 1983: 55).

It is unlikely that Jefferson was interested in promoting Christianity among Native Americans. Adams (1983: 28) surmises that the 'Indians' Jefferson had in mind were not

Native Americans, but rather his Federalist opponents, who he believed were in thrall to Calvinist obscurantism.

The table of contents shows the extracts grouped under various headings, which follow the outline set out in the ‘Syllabus’. The Syllabus is printed in the Documentary Appendix. The *PJ* headings most relevant to Jefferson’s ethical worldview include:

- Preachers to be humble
- False teachers
- Disciples should love one another
- The duty of mutual forgiveness and forbearance
- The sabbath
- Deeds & not ceremonies avail
- Words the fruit of the heart
- Parable of the Samaritan: true benevolence
- Humility, pride, hypocrisy, Pharisaism
- God no respecter of persons
- Misfortune no proof of sin
- Mere justice no praise
- The merit of disinterested good
- Acts better than professions
- Submission to magistrates
- The bond of marriage
- The duty of improving our talent
- Vain calculations of life

- A future life

(Facsimile in Adams 1983: 57-59. Original spellings. Note that the facsimile pages are flipped, the correct order being 57, 59, 58)

Soon after compiling *PJ*, Jefferson (still President) started work on a more ambitious compilation. This would eventually become *LJ*, which expands *PJ* by including verses describing Jesus' life and career. It would also expand it by clipping the New Testament text in four languages, all of which Jefferson could read: Greek, Latin, French, and English. He had the required four pairs of copies by 1805. The French version is the most surprising. Only French-speaking Protestants read the Bible in French. The edition Jefferson used was translated by a Swiss Protestant who died in 1747 (Adams 1983: 299). Jefferson had some French Protestant acquaintances, such as Rabaut de St-Etienne, one of the Girondist politicians who was guillotined in the revolutionary Terror of 1793. Prior to that, he was one of the liberal intellectuals with whom Jefferson discussed a charter of rights for France (TJ to Rabaut, 3 June 1789, in *PTJ* 15: 166). Jefferson detested the Catholic Church as much as he detested New England Calvinism, in both cases for their corruption of what he called the 'diamonds in the dunghill'. Maybe his choice of a French text for *LJ* was influenced by warmer feelings for the often-persecuted French Protestants?

Likewise, it is probably significant that the Latin text of *LJ* is not from the Vulgate, which is the Latin Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. The Greek and Latin source text which he clipped was compiled by a 17th-century Dutch Calvinist theologian, Johann Leusden, who made some distinctive markings in the Greek text and added a line-by-line Latin translation from the Greek by a 16th-century Italian scholar, Benito Arius Montano. The edition was republished numerous times in the Netherlands, the center of Protestant theology. For

example, the Oxford University union catalog (at

https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/discovery/search?vid=44OXF_INST:SOLO&sortby=rank&lang=en,

consulted Nov 1 2023) contains five 17th-century Dutch editions, and numerous American editions which postdate Jefferson's effort, but not unfortunately the London edition which he clipped (published by F. Wingrave, 1794: Adams 1983: 299). Hence the Latin text of Montano has no authority in its own right (nor indeed does the French text). Indeed, the only text with authority is the Greek New testament, whose content scholars more or less agreed on by Leusden's time. Maybe Jefferson's motive was to show that the Vulgate was wrong. However, I have not found any criticism of the Vulgate translation specifically in Jefferson's writings.

After collecting the source texts, Jefferson did nothing with them for a long while. He had the most difficult part of his Presidency still to come. Thus he did not return to the project until far into his retirement. He probably completed his compilation in summer 1820, when he had it bound (Adams 1983: 125). Unlike his prior effort, he kept the compilation strictly to himself, and probably read it to himself at night. His family only discovered it after his death. It stayed in his white descendants' hands until purchased by the Smithsonian Institution in 1895. A facsimile was published in 1904 at government expense (Adams 1983: 125-6), and so *LJ* became publicly available, and is what most people who have heard of the 'Jefferson Bible' are familiar with. Copies are given to all new members of Congress.

However, the first compilation, *PJ*, unknown to the world until its reconstruction by Adams 1983, contains the more interesting clues to Jefferson's ethics. In the table of contents of *LJ*, Jefferson does not repeat his grouping of the passages he clips according to the ethical messages he thinks they convey.

What then are we to make of Jefferson's attitude to Christ and Christianity, aided by the Syllabus, these two volumes, and numerous letters? A first step is to determine which of the narrators of Jesus-stories he preferred. To be pedantic, no modern scholar, nor probably Jefferson, believes that there were four authors named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, still less that 'Matthew' and 'John' are the disciples of those names mentioned in the Gospel of 'Matthew'. But to avoid pedantry, I use the traditional names without distancing quote marks.

Table xx.1 shows the proportion of Jefferson's text in the reconstructed *PJ* and the extant *LJ* that he took from each of the four sources:

[Table 9.1 here]

Table 9.1 shows that Jefferson used Matthew much more, and Luke somewhat more, than if he had had an equal probability of selecting a passage from any of the gospels. For example, Matthew appears twice as often as that null hypothesis expects in *PJ*, and 1.6 times more often in *LJ*. The low proportion of extracts from John is to be expected. The gospel of John is quite different to the other three, which are jointly labelled the 'Synoptic Gospels'. The author of John sees Jesus as a mystical and mysterious figure, often calling himself the 'Son of Man'. It has fewer parables and more on Jesus' divine origins than the other three. Most of Jefferson's extracts from John are actually from his narrative of the trial and execution of Jesus, where Jefferson may have liked John's particularly dramatic portrayal of Jesus' betrayal by Judas and his interrogation by Pilate. Notably, Jefferson omits the parts of the passion narrative, in both Matthew and John, where the writer blames the Jewish authorities for the death of Jesus. He also omits most passages where Jesus claims to be the son of God.

The low incidence of extracts from Mark is probably because Mark contains far fewer of Jefferson's diamonds in the dunghill – what he regarded as the authentic doctrines of Jesus – than do either Matthew or Luke. Scholarly study of the Synoptic Gospels began in Jefferson's lifetime. For the first time scholars analysed the passages that are common to two or more of the writers, and those that are unique to each. One such compiler was Jefferson's friend Joseph Priestley, one of the hoped-for expanders of Jefferson's Syllabus (Priestley 1777, 1780). Priestley was an English scientist (co-discoverer of oxygen) and Unitarian. He worked in Birmingham, as part of the 'Lunar Society' which included Jefferson's revered teacher William Small, and the engineers James Watt and Matthew Boulton. However, he was driven out by the 'Priestley riots' of 1791 occasioned by his support for the French Revolution (and perhaps his support for Unitarianism). The riot destroyed the Birmingham Unitarian meeting house, where Priestley ministered, and his scientific apparatus. He settled in Pennsylvania in 1794. (Priestley 1782; Schofield 2004; Uglow 2007). Jefferson ordered Priestley's two *Harmonies of the Gospel*, one in English and one in Greek, from a Philadelphia bookseller in April 1803, and finally received them from Priestley himself, probably in September 1803 (Adams 1983: 26). Priestley and all his successors have found that the number of verses found only in Mark is the smallest of the three.

Armed with Priestley, Jefferson set to work cutting and pasting. One of the very few stories unique to Mark is Mark 14:51-2 (in the King James translation):

And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked (Adams 1983: 279)

That Jefferson picked out this story as one of his very few extracts from Mark shows that he was a careful biblical scholar. He likely learnt of the uniqueness of this story from one of Priestley's *Harmonies*.

The problem of determining the correct sequence of the three Synoptic Gospels has occupied scholars for two millennia. Intellectual progress depended on careful analysis of the three Greek texts, which as noted began in Jefferson's lifetime. The first statistical analysis is by Honoré 1968, a remarkable effort by a scholar of Roman law who transposed techniques he had used to analyse dependencies among Roman law texts to the case of the three synoptic gospels. The latest efforts at the time of writing are by Abakuks (2012, 2015). Whereas statistical analysis, early in the history of computing, delivered a completely authoritative answer to the disputed question of which numbers of the *Federalist* were written by James Madison and which by Alexander Hamilton (Mosteller and Wallace 1963), there has been no such consensus on the sequence of the Synoptic Gospels. None was written before, at earliest, the 60s CE. Most scholars seem to believe that Mark came first, and that Matthew and Luke, independently of each other, drew from Mark plus a now lost collection of the sayings of Jesus, labelled *Q* for *Quelle*, source) by German scholars. Whether or not *Q* ever existed, it is consensually (but not universally) agreed that Matthew and Luke each drew on some collection of the sayings of Jesus and added them to the barebones account in Mark.

Jefferson clearly prefers Matthew's version of the sayings. In *PJ*, but not in *LJ*, he pastes the long genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3: 23-38 ('... which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God'). In neither compilation does he clip the colorful, but incompatible, nativity stories of Matthew and Luke (no shepherds, kings, nor guiding star, nor massacre of the innocents), nor the genealogy in Matthew which contradicts that in Luke. He also uses a

section of the Luke Passion narrative, where, uniquely among the four narratives, Pilate sends Jesus off to Herod, the ruler of Galilee, in the hope that Herod will take the problem off his hands (Luke 23: 4-23, in Adams 1983 103-4 and 287). He ends both compilations at the death and burial of Jesus. If we disregarded the Luke genealogy and passion narrative, the bias towards Matthew would be even clearer than is shown in Table 9.1.

Jefferson's ethical views had clearly evolved since his youth, when he attended the Episcopal Church (Ragosta 2013: 9) but showed no signs of believing in Christian ethics, beyond, perhaps, a conventional expression of faith:

The most fortunate of us all in our journey through life frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us: and to fortify our minds against the attacks of these calamities and misfortunes should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives. The only method of doing this is to assume a perfect resignation to the divine will, to consider that whatever does happen, must happen, and that by our uneasiness we cannot prevent the blow before it does fall, but we may add to it's force after it has fallen. These considerations and others such as these may enable us in some measure to surmount the difficulties thrown in our way, to bear up with a tolerable degree of patience under this burthen of life, and to proceed with a pious and unshaken resignation till we arrive at our journey's end, where we may deliver up our trust into the hands of him who gave it, and receive such reward as to him shall seem proportioned to our merit. (TJ to John Page, Jul. 15 1763, in *PTJ* 1:10.)

Read carefully and in context, however, even this letter is not necessarily Christian. Early death was common; Jefferson had lost his father and would soon lose his favorite sister. In his *Literary Commonplace Book* (LCB: Wilson 1989), many of the early entries are from the Roman philosopher Cicero, who passed on the ideas of the earlier Greek Stoics. ‘Stoicism’ means much more than the colloquial use of that word, but Jefferson’s letter to Page is at least as much Stoic as Christian. In LCB #60, probably copied before 1763, he quotes Cicero: *Moriendum est enim omnibus: esset tamen miseriae finis in morte* (‘For all must die; yet the end of misery would be in death’). The theme is almost ghoulishly echoed by so much of the poetry with which African American slaves consoled themselves: death as a release. That is a Stoic rather than Christian sentiment, unless one believes in the afterlife, which Jefferson, mostly, did not (Neem 2007, 2008, 2012). It is true that the end of Jefferson’s letter to Page is more conventionally Christian, or at any rate deistic, but that is not the only pervasive influence to be read from it.

At about the same time, according to the handwriting analysis undertaken by Wilson 1989, Jefferson was commonplacing the radical English skeptic Henry Bolingbroke:

It is not true that Christ revealed an entire body of ethics, proved to be the law of nature from principles of reason, and reaching all the duties of life. If mankind wanted such [a] code, to which recourse might be had on every occasion, as to an unerring rule in every part of the moral duties, such a code is still wanting; for the gospel is not such a code[.]...

A system ... collected from the writings of antient heathen moralists of Tully [i.e., Cicero], of Seneca, of Epictetus, and others, would be more full, more entire, more

coherent, and more clearly deduced from unquestionable principles of knowledge.

LCB #20 in Wilson 1989: 35. Original source: Bolingbroke 1754, II: 305-6.

Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus were the leading Stoic philosophers. Jefferson encountered them early. At the same time as he was commonplacing Bolingbroke, Adam Smith was publishing in Glasgow his first great book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1759), of which Part VII contains a detailed and sympathetic analysis of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. As noted elsewhere, Jefferson sent a reading list to his neighbour Robert Skipwith, who had asked for books “suited to the capacity of a common reader who understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study. He commended the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to Skipwith, but there is no evidence that he owned a copy. Ultimately, it does not matter. The English and Scottish Enlightenments, jointly and severally, led Jefferson to Stoicism.

Thus the germ of *PJ* and *LJ* seems to have been planted by Bolingbroke over forty years before the first compilation and nearly sixty years before the second. Jefferson’s “Skipwith list” was an intimidating answer to his neighbor’s request. Here is its ‘Religion’ section in full.

RELIGION.

Locke’s conduct of the mind in search of truth. 12 mo. 3/

Xenophon’s memoirs of Socrates. by Feilding. 8 vo. 5/

Epictetus. by Mrs. Carter. 2 v. 12 mo. 6/

Antoninus by Collins. 3/

Seneca. by L’Estrange. 8 vo. 5/

Cicero's Offices. by Guthrie. 8 vo. 5/
Cicero's Tusculan questions. Eng. 3/
Ld. Bolingbroke's Philosophical works. 5 v. 8 vo. £ 1.5
Hume's essays. 4 v. 12 mo. 12/
Ld. Kaim's Natural religion. 8 vo. 6/
Philosophical survey of Nature. 3/
Oeconomy of human life. 2/
Sterne's sermons. 7 v. 12 mo. £ 1.1
Sherlock on death. 8 vo. 5/
Sherlock on a future state. 5/

(Robert Skipwith to TJ, Jul. 17 1771, *PTJ* 1: 74. TJ to RS with enclosure Aug. 3 1771, *PTJ* 1: 76-80).

Of the ethicists on this list, only John Locke was a Christian. The list contains no Bibles. Five of the books on the list (Epictetus to Cicero) relate to Stoic philosophy, and the next three are by contemporary sceptics.

When, and how far, did Jefferson change his mind about Jesus vis-à-vis the Stoics? There are various, possibly confusing, hints in his correspondence. The hints are confusing because the argument-averse Jefferson often told correspondents what they wanted to hear while, read carefully, did not affirm it as Jefferson's own belief. But two letters picked out by John Ragosta (2013: 13) may be signposts. In the first, he declines on conscientious grounds to act as a godfather:

I am truly sensible, Sir, of the honour you do me in proposing to me that of becoming one of the Sponsors of your child, and return you my sincere thanks for it. At the same time I am not a little mortified that scruples, perhaps not well founded, forbid my undertaking this honourable office. The person who becomes sponsor for a child, according to the ritual of the church in which I was educated, makes a solemn profession, before god and the world, of faith in articles, which I had never sense enough to comprehend, and it has always appeared to me that comprehension must precede assent. The difficulty of reconciling the ideas of Unity and Trinity, have, from a very early part of my life, excluded me from the office of sponsorship... (TJ to J.P.P. Derieux, Jul. 25 1788. *PTJ* 13: 418)

By ‘articles, which I had never sense enough to comprehend’, Jefferson probably means one of the traditional creeds of the Christian church, and/or the “39 Articles” of the Church of England which still governed the doctrines of the Episcopal Church in Virginia. Of these, Article 1 requires its followers to accept the Holy Trinity. This article suffices to exclude Quakers, Unitarians, and Thomas Jefferson.

In the second letter, the much older Jefferson speaks of ‘our saviour’, while nevertheless denouncing (as he frequently did) Calvinist and Platonic accretions to what he regarded as Jesus’ doctrines:

I thank you for the pamphlets you have been so kind as to send me, which I now return. they give a lively view of the state of religious dissension now prevailing in the North, and making it’s way to the South. most controversies begin with a discussion of principles; but soon degenerate into episodical, verbal, or personal

cavils. too much of this is seen in these pamphlets, and, as usual, those whose dogmas are the most unintelligible are the most angry. the truth is that Calvinism has introduced into the Christian religion more new absurdities than it's leader had purged it of old ones. our saviour did not come into the world to save metaphysicians only. his doctrines are levelled to the simplest understanding: and it is only by banishing Hierophantic mysteries and Scholastic subtleties, which they have nick-named Christianity, and getting back to the plain and unsophisticated precepts of Christ, that we become real Christians. the half reformation of Luther and Calvin did something towards a restoration of his genuine doctrines; the present contest will, I hope, compleat what they begun, and place us where the evangelists left us. (TJ to Salma Hale, Jul. 25 1818, in *PTJ: RS* 13: 160).

Hale was a Congressman from New Hampshire who had dropped in on Monticello without warning (as people did). His later notes of his conversation with Jefferson record that they discussed a series of pamphlets on Unitarianism, which leaked news of TJ's 1803 Syllabus. Jefferson consistently believed that the doctrine of the Trinity (one god in three persons) was mystical nonsense, as did Priestley. Hence Jefferson's least accurate prediction:

I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its conscience to neither kings or priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian (TJ to Benjamin Waterhouse Jun. 26 1822 in Peterson 1984: 1459)

So, for sure, by 1788, and probably much earlier, Jefferson had rejected the creeds of the branches of the Christian Church that require sponsors at christenings to sign up to them. By 1818 at latest, he was comfortable with telling the most casual of acquaintances that he regarded Jesus as 'our saviour'. The following year, he wrote to a New England Presbyterian clergyman who had offered his book for the University of Virginia library:

in that branch of religion which regards the moralities of life, and the duties of a social being, which teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to do good to all men, I am sure that you & I do not differ. we probably differ on that which relates to the dogmas of theology, the foundation of all sectarianism, and on which no two sects dream alike; for if they did they would then be of the same. you say you are a Calvinist. I am not. I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know. I am not a Jew: and therefore do not adopt their theology, which supposes the god of infinite justice to punish the sins of the fathers upon their children, unto the 3d and 4th generation: and the benevolent and sublime reformer of that religion has told us only that god is good and perfect, but has not defined him. I am therefore of his theology, believing that we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition. and if we could all, after his example, leave the subject as undefinable, we should all be of one sect, doers of good & eschewers of evil. no doctrines of his lead to schism. it is the speculations of crazy theologians which have made a Babel of a religion the most moral and sublime ever preached to man, and calculated to heal, and not to create differences. (TJ to Ezra Styles Ely, Jun. 25 1819. In *PTJ: RS* 14:470.

The fullest outline of Jefferson's later ethical views is in the *Syllabus* which, as noted above, he wanted either Benjamin Rush or Joseph Priestley to expand for him, but had to do himself

because neither was prepared to veer as far as him from Christianity. The Syllabus is printed in full in the Documentary Appendix. It opens, echoing the title of Priestley 1782:

[No] notice should be taken of the corruptions of reason, among the antients, to wit, the idolatry & superstition of their vulgar, Nor of the corruptions of Christianity by the over learned among it's professors.

Let a just view be taken of the moral principles inculcated by philosophy, or of their individuals; particularly Pythagoras, Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, Antoninus.

Thus he still admires some classical philosophers. He cites Socrates because he believes that Plato corrupted the true doctrines of Socrates. He is apparently as confident that he can retrieve the true Socrates, who wrote nothing, as the true Jesus. Epicurus is the founder of the Epicurean school, and the other four named are prominent Stoics. 'Antoninus' is the Roman philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* were very popular among Enlightenment thinkers.

He goes on:

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

This seems unfair, at least, to Socrates as presented by Plato in some dialogues, such as the *Crito*; but let that pass. Next he deals with Jewish philosophy as presented in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament):

Their system was Deism, that is, the belief of one only god. but their ideas of him, & of his attributes, were degrading & injurious.

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

Again, one might argue that this is fair as regards many of the bloodthirsty stories in the Hebrew Bible ('He smote all the first-born of Egypt') but overlooks, for instance, the Book of Ruth or the Book of Job. It also exhibits the characteristic Jefferson feature, or bug, of defining something in the way that he, and perhaps only he, wished to understand it ("Their system was Deism, *that is...* [my emphasis]).

Then he introduces Jesus, whom he presents as the reformer of Jewish ethics:

The disadvantages under which his doctrines appear are remarkable.

1. like Socrates & Epictetus, he wrote nothing himself.
2. but he had not, like them, a Xenophon or an Arrian to write for him

Xenophon was one of the two Athenians who wrote down doctrines of Socrates. The other was Plato, whom Jefferson detested. Likewise, Arrian transmitted the philosophy attributed to Epictetus. The writers of the New Testament Gospels by contrast were ‘

the most unlettered, & ignorant of men: who wrote too from memory, & not till long after the transactions had passed

That they wrote long after the event is undeniable; ‘unlettered and ignorant’ is unfair to the writer of the Gospel of John, but Jefferson distrusted that as a distortion.

Hence the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole. and fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us, mutilated, mistated, & often unintelligible.. they have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of schismatising followers, who have found an interest in sophisticating & perverting the simple doctrines he taught, by engrafting on them the mysticisms of a Graecian Sophist

... meaning Plato. Plato taught, in his *Republic*, that the things we think we perceive are an illusion, and that only a philosopher-king can perceive true reality (‘the Form of the Good’). Platonic philosophy was popular in the Greek-speaking world into which Saint Paul and others projected the Christian message. Jefferson is far from alone in seeing it overlaid from that point onwards by Platonic ‘mysticisms’. The doctrine of the immortal soul, for instance, central to many versions of Christianity, is a direct transplant from Plato.

Jefferson continues:

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.

The question of his being a member of the god-head, or in direct communication with it, claimed for him by some of his followers, and denied by others, is foreign to the present view, which is merely an estimate of the intrinsic merit of his doctrines.

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.

His moral doctrines relating to kindred & friends were more pure & perfect, than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews.

and they went far beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind

Armed with his sublime belief that, while serving as President of the USA, he could detect the diamonds in the dunghill, Jefferson proceeded to compile his two versions of the 'true' doctrines of Jesus. Even his selection of quite a lot of the trial and crucifixion narratives had its point. To Jefferson, the collusion between the Jewish high priests and the Roman authorities that the gospel stories claim shows the need for the separation of church and state – or 'the altar and the throne' as he wrote.

Thus by 1803 Jefferson's ethical views had evolved from those he absorbed from Bolingbroke and (probably) William Small. He retained their approval of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, but thought that the genuine sayings of Jesus formed the basis of a

more comprehensive ethical code. ‘Love your enemies’ indeed, which Jefferson must have found hard as he was being hounded by Federalists.

The last letter

One of the pleasures of Jefferson’s old age was the renewal of his friendship with John Adams, which had been sundered by politics since 1800. In 1812 the veteran busybody Benjamin Rush brought them back together, and the two reconciled, retired Presidents had a long dialogue about ethics, religion, and the Enlightenment (Cappon 1987). Adams was robustly critical of some of Jefferson’s heroes, including Condorcet. Jefferson did not rise to that bait.

Jefferson’s skies darkened in 1825, when he finally realized that his debts were unrepayable, and his remarkably robust constitution began to give up on him. Many of his views were in private letters, to various trusted ethicists about Jesus and the Stoics, or to Adams about the American and French Revolutions and the Enlightenment. However, he made one final statement. In June 1826 Roger C. Weightman, the Mayor of Washington DC, wrote to Jefferson to invite him to attend the city’s celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, on July 4 1826. Too ill to travel, Jefferson sent what has been known as his final letter. The full text is in the Documentary Appendix. Jefferson opens by regretting that he will be unable to join the ‘small band’ of surviving signers (in fact he and Adams had been keeping a tally, and they believed that the band now comprised only the two of them). The heart of the letter is this passage:

may it [viz., the Declaration of Independence] 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 & security of self government. the 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.

Jefferson knew he had not long to live. In fact, he and Adams died on the same day – July 4 1826. Jefferson's last words, reportedly, were "Is it the Fourth?" Adams' last words, a few hours later, were reportedly "Thomas Jefferson lives". Both reports are unreliable but picturesque.

This sad but glorious coincidence was enough to persuade many Americans, in the midst of what has been called the "Second Great Awakening" of evangelical Christianity in the USA (see, e.g., Ahlstrom 1972; Howe 1991; Carwardine 1992; Howe 2007: 1-3, MacCulloch 2010 chs 20 and 23), to celebrate God's special providence for America.

Jefferson's letter is in an utterly different spirit. It is no exaggeration to call Jefferson's work on religious freedom from 1800 onwards the climax of the American Enlightenment. The Danbury and Weightman letters are instances of its public face, which had not changed since the Virginia Declaration of Religion Freedom. The Syllabus and Gospel compilations are

instances of its private face, which had changed since the young Jefferson's adherence to Cicero and Epictetus.

The Weightman letter requires some parsing:

- “arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves”. All three streams – English, Scottish, and French – of Jefferson's enlightenment converge here. The word ‘Monkish’ (which he could have drawn direct from Voltaire) signals an attack on medieval Christianity, and specifically the Roman Catholic Church, which is also entirely in the spirit of Smith and Hume. Bolingbroke, Jefferson, admitted, had gone over to the dark side with his brief service to the Jacobite ‘Old Pretender’ in the rebellion of 1715, ‘but he redeemed that single act by his establishment of the principles which proved it to be wrong’ (TJ to Francis Eppes, Jan. 19 1821: *PTS RS* 16:)
- “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”.

This is English, Scottish, and French, all at the same time, while the combination is uniquely American. In one of his fine pieces of detection, Douglass Adair (1952) showed that the striking image of ‘saddles on their backs’ comes from the speech from the scaffold of Richard Rumbold, a Scotsman executed in Edinburgh after being captured during the Duke of Monmouth's unsuccessful rising against the Catholic King James II and VII in 1685. Where Monmouth failed, the two convention parliaments of England and Scotland, succeeded in 1689-90 by installing William and Mary as monarchs by contract, subject to parliamentary

supremacy. The English country Whigs had finally curtailed the power of the Executive. The Scottish Parliament had created one of the preconditions for the Scottish Enlightenment. Rumbold himself had served in Oliver Cromwell's army and had been a guard at the execution of Charles I in 1649. He certainly knew the work of the Diggers led by Winstanley, and of the Levellers who had argued, in Putney Church in 1647, that 'the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he'. The Putney Debates were not rediscovered until the 1890s (Mendle 2001; Baker 2008), so Jefferson could not have read them. But their echo reached his last letter.

The "general spread of the light of science" was the shared vision of Jefferson and Condorcet. Jefferson owned a copy of Condorcet's posthumous *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain* (Sketch for a history of the Progress of the Human Mind) published in Paris in 1795. This is a remarkable work, both in what it says and in how it was written. Condorcet was hiding in the home of a very courageous landlady, Mme Vernet, after he was declared an 'outlaw' during the revolutionary Terror of 1793-4. His status meant that not only he but she too would be guillotined without trial if he was discovered. While hiding in her house at the rue des Fossoyeurs ('Gravediggers' Street') on the Left Bank in Paris between the Eglise de S-Sulpice and the Luxembourg Gardens, he wrote a paean to the perfectibility of mankind, of which the *Esquisse* was the only part to be discovered immediately after his death. (Jefferson owned a copy of this part, published at the expense of the French state (1795). The full *Tableau*, of which the *Esquisse* is a prospectus, has been pieced together by the Condorcet team in the French national CNRS and published as Schandeler and Crépel 2004.)

Thanks to the Special Collections team at the Library of Congress, I have had the great privilege of seeing Jefferson's copy of the 1795 edition, which was one of his books that

survived the first of 1851. In his copy, Jefferson picked a couple of quarrels with Condorcet.

Condorcet wrote:

Ainsi l'on vit naître en Europe une sorte de liberté de penser, non pour les hommes, mais pour les chrétiens: et, si nous exceptons la France, c'est pour les seuls chrétiens que par-tout ailleurs elle existe encore aujourd'hui. ('Thus in Europe there arose a sort of freedom of thought, not for all men, but for Christians. With the exception of France, freedom of thought exists only for Christians anywhere else today')

Jefferson annotated: *Virginia was an exception long before France. the Virginia act for freedom of religion was printed in a handbill, & in the hands of the members of the French convention in 1789. when they went on this subject themselves.*

A few pages later, Condorcet wrote in praise of René Descartes, and Jefferson annotated that Descartes' *ingenious imagination led mankind astray and retarded science for an age or two.. to him was owing particularly that the French nation were so long & still are in the rear of others in physical sciences* (Condorcet 1795, pp. 207 and 230; annotations in TJ's copy)

Unlike John Adams, Jefferson was not a frequent writer of marginal comments in his books.

That he did so with the *Esquisse* marks his deep engagement with the text. Despite their priority disputes, Jefferson and Condorcet were at one on the perfectibility of mankind.

Condorcet believed that it would come in what he called the 'Tenth Epoch', when all superstition and ignorance will have been banished under the pure light of mathematics and reason. He managed to write that while under the shadow of death in the Terror. When he had finished, he escaped from Mme Vernet, to save her life. He tried to seek refuge with his former friends the Suards, who refused to take him in because he had betrayed the liberal monarchism for which they stood. He took refuge in a country inn, in the unconvincing guise

of a peasant from the Condorcet estate in Picardy. When asked by the suspicious innkeeper (who was an informant for the Terror) how many eggs he would like in his omelet, the peasant reportedly replied 'A dozen', at which he was locked up while his alibi was checked. He was found dead in his cell the next day, and his identity was not established for weeks.

Jefferson met a kinder fate. But his belief in human perfectibility, together with the English and Scottish roots of the Weightman letter, make it a perfect epitaph, and the culmination of the American Enlightenment.