

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“Thomas Jefferson’s Religion”**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**January 10, 2010**

**Reading:**

Thomas Jefferson’s advice to his nephew, Peter Carr:

“Shake off all the fears and servile prejudices under which weak minds are crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion.”

“Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must approve more the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”

“Do not be frightened from this enquiry by any fear of its consequences.”

“If it ends in a belief that there is a god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you.”

“If you find reason to believe there is a god, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, that will be of vast additional incitement. . . .”

“In fine, I repeat that you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject any thing because any other person, or description of persons have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven and you are answerable not for the rightness, but for the uprightness of the decision.”

**Introduction**

In October I presented a sermon on “Thomas Jefferson and TJMC,UU” as part of a series on Thomas Jefferson. I said at the time that this would be the beginning of a process in which we would look at the namesake for this church as well as the history of the church regarding race. In the coming weeks we will follow through on that promise. A series of discussions is planned for February and March after the 11:15 AM service and lunch. These will include a panel on the racial history of the church, and the city of Charlottesville, followed by a discussion of where we are now and where we are going relative to “Undoing Racism.” The third program will feature Dr. Peter Onuf, distinguished professor at UVA, and a Jefferson scholar.

As you probably know this process was initiated because the Thomas Jefferson District Board has proposed a name change for the District. I have proposed that we not focus on the name of the church, but rather on where we are and where we are going relative to race in Charlottesville. This is especially timely because of the “Dialogue on Race” going on in the Charlottesville area. This dialogue will be going on at the same time that we will be having these congregational conversations.

I want you to know that we have no outcome in mind as we begin these conversations. The process is more important than the outcome. We also don’t have a deadline in mind for the process. One of the questions I have asked during this process is: How can we be honest about Jefferson’s shortcomings and also celebrate his contributions to American and democratic life? Today I wish to focus on the latter, especially his contributions to religious liberty.

I have chosen to look at the broader issue of his religion. One could argue that this is more important than an investigation of Jefferson’s attitudes on race and slavery. I would conclude that they are both important, but this church was named for Jefferson not because of his views on slavery but rather on his Unitarian views. It is these views that I will discuss today.

First, I must tell you a story. In 1986 I made a trip to Charlottesville and toured Monticello and the University of Virginia. A student was leading the tour of the University and said: “Thomas Jefferson didn’t

believe in religion.” First, I must tell you I wouldn’t want to be a tour guide if I were on the tour. I listen for every detail. I had to correct the young ladies comment. The first chance I got, I pulled her aside and suggested she re-read her original script. Thomas Jefferson believed in religion, but not the “establishment of religion.”

Following my tour, I returned to Raleigh, NC, and wrote a long epistle to the person responsible for the tour guides telling her of my experience, and of the religious beliefs of Thomas Jefferson. I am sure she appreciated my letter, and it has influenced the tours ever since. Sometime this year I will take the tour again, and I look forward to what they say about Thomas Jefferson’s religious views.

This is not the first time someone has concluded that Thomas Jefferson was anti-religious. Jefferson made many comments that have been construed as anti-religious. When President George W. Bush spoke at Monticello, July 4th, 2008, speech-writers quoted from Jefferson but edited out an anti-religious comment. Here is what Jefferson said:

May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition have persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.

The speech-writers were probably wise in taking out the reference to monkish ignorance and superstition. Jefferson was not inclined to be politically correct. He wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “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.”

I must say in my study of religion history, when someone is critical of a particular belief, especially as relates to a specific view of God, they are often criticized as being atheist or infidels. So it was with Thomas Jefferson. My thesis in this sermon is that Thomas Jefferson was indeed critical of the religious views of his culture, but was not an atheist or against all the views of Christianity. Like the early Unitarians in Transylvania, Poland, England and America, he saw his views as more authentic Christianity. I will say more about this later.

Andrew Stuttaford concludes that “Jefferson’s attitudes towards religion was not quite so cut and dried—nor so uniformly hostile—as some secularists would have us believe.” Many politicians during Jefferson’s life and since have criticized him for being opposed to Christianity. Jefferson also wrote in his *Notes*: “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only first basis, a conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are the gift of God?”

Gertrude Himmelfard also writes of Jefferson’s respect for religion in her book, *The Roads to Modernity*.

On his way to church one Sunday, Jefferson was met by a friend:

“You are going to church, Mr. Jefferson. You do not believe a word in it.”

“Sir,” Mr. Jefferson replied, “no nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion.

No can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man and I as chief Magistrate of this nation am bound to give it the sanction of my example. Good morning, Sir.” (“Dispatches from the Culture Wars” by Andrew Stuttaford)

### **Jefferson's Religious Pilgrimage**

Paul Conkin, in a book titled *The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson*, gives a very thorough account of the development of Jefferson’s religious views. Conkin defines religion as the,

. . . broad or solacing beliefs about reality, special and fulfilling types of experience, rituals or forms of worship, and highly sanctioned moral codes. . . beliefs . . . variously conducive to the attainment of wisdom and enlightenment, ecstasy or beatitude, mental or physical health, and thus worldly success and happiness or life beyond death.

Conkin concludes that Jefferson was clearly religious in his nature:

He nourished consoling beliefs about the universe and at times enjoyed a sense of wonderment

and awe. He spent a lifetime agonizing over the foundations of morality. He sought types of wisdom, wanted a healthy mind, and always was confident of life after death, a belief that gave him consolation and also one that seemed necessary as a support for public morality. He turned, continuously, to inspired religious texts, those deriving from classical authors as well as selected parts of the Christian Bible. He honored religious teachers who did not use mystifications to gain illegitimate power, eventually believing Jesus the greatest of these. He appreciated the role of religious institutions. But he was very leery of any priesthood and had almost no involvement with any organized religious sect, possibly because he found the options available to him so inviting. (pp. 19-20)

It would be easy to stop this sermon here. Conkin summarizes better than I can the fact that Jefferson respected religion and had a religious belief. He did question the religious views of his day, and the role of the priesthood. This all started when he was young. He was nominally an Anglican in his youth, but began to question the Christian scheme of salvation and especially the concept of the Trinity.

What I would like to document in this sermon is the evolution of Jefferson's views over time. As a student at William and Mary he was influenced by the English and Scottish views of natural and rational religion as opposed to the revealed and what he considered to be superstitious religion. He had a respect for Jesus, and he always did, but more his actions, than his metaphysical beliefs.

After college he became a "rigid, puritanical moralist with exceptionally high expectations of himself and others. He wanted to find a ground for moral behavior." Jefferson believed that the creator had implanted in human a moral sense, of what is good, a conscience, and the courage to do right. Since he could not believe in superstition, he looked for intellectual support for his beliefs. (Conklin)

As I look at the beliefs of Jefferson, he was clearly in line with the first generation of Unitarians in England and America. He was what I would call a "religious rationalist." He looked for beliefs that are common among the religions of the world, and some would call "religious essentialism." He wanted his beliefs to be logical and consistent with experience, and similar to his political beliefs, he wanted them to be self-evident. (pp. 22-24, Conkin)

Jefferson also had a dark period in his life, ironically at the same time that he was to make a significant contribution to the history of America, in the middle of the 1770's. He lost a best friend in 1773, then his daughter in 1775, his mother in 1776. He had many problems when he was governor of Virginia, ending in a resignation, a public investigation of his role during the British occupation of Richmond, and his near-capture at Monticello. This embarrassed and embittered him. Then his wife died in 1782. Conkin says he was devastated and close to suicide. I quote:

Almost consumed by grief, he struggled to acquire control over his passions, to attain a tranquility of mind in the midst of constant suffering. He tried to discipline his will to accept the fortunes of fate or of divine providence in a period when he was almost overcome by a morbid, pessimistic, or even fatalistic mood." (p. 27)

During this period he turned to Epicurus who believed in an "eternal, material, atomistic universe as a first principle." Epicurus, the stoic, promoted a belief in gods above humans but they were not involved with humans. He saw virtue, and the minimization of desire, as the foundation of happiness. Tranquility is achieved through avoidance of pain. This is what Jefferson sought—retreat and self-discipline, yearning for peace and solace at Monticello, indulging in conversation, music, reading, reflection, and the arts in his "mountaintop garden." (p. 28)

The question that we all need to ask of Jefferson and one that Wayne Arnason asked when he was minister here, is "Was Jefferson a Unitarian?" The second important question is: "What contribution did Jefferson make to the growth of religious freedom in America?"

As Jefferson's religious pilgrimage continued, especially in France, he returned to his interest in Christianity. Along with Ben Franklin, he dismissed all forms of dogmatism and was even more anti-clerical. He reevaluated his beliefs of Jesus and learned about Unitarian Christianity. This would result in his editing the New Testament, removing the miracles and focusing on the teachings of Jesus.

He was greatly influenced by the Unitarians in England, Richard Price, and Joseph Priestley. He learned about Arius, often seen as the first Unitarian, and Socinus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer in Poland. He wanted Priestley to be on the faculty at UVA, but, unfortunately, Priestley died before the University was founded.

### Conclusions

Jefferson helped dismantle a long tradition of religious establishment in America. In 1786, he proposed the law that no longer made Anglicanism the state religion of Virginia. Jefferson was proud of this accomplishment. He asked that it be listed on his tombstone, along with the Declaration of Independence and the found of the University of Virginia. This dismantling did not take place in Massachusetts until 1833. In Virginia the new law would allow for Baptists, Universalists and other new religions to practice equally with the older Congregationalists and Anglicans in Virginia.

The most important thing we can remember about Jefferson's religion is that he considered it a personal matter. He was attacked when he ran for office as an infidel, deist and atheist. The truth is, he continued to believe in a deity and in the moral teachings of Jesus.

Jefferson was a Christian in the real sense of that word—he emphasized living a good life, and loving your neighbor as yourself. He never sought to use his power as Governor, Vice President or President to further his own religious views. He refused to publish them even after those views would be considered dangerous to his political life. He also refused to proclaim a national thanksgiving because he feared it would influence the country's religious practices.

Jefferson's religious views are mostly revealed in his personal letters to friends. In a letter to Miles King he wrote what I consider to be a succinct summary of his religious views:

I must ever believe that religion substantially good which produces an honest life. . . Our particular principles of religion are a subject of accountability to our God alone. I inquire after no man's and trouble none with mine; nor is it given to us in this life to know whether yours or mine, our friends or foes, are exactly right.

Jefferson's recommendations for the teaching of religion at UVA are an example of his tolerance. He wrote:

We suggest the expediency of encouraging the different religious sects to establish, each for itself, a professorship of their own tenets on the confines of the university, so that their students may attend lectures there and have the free use of our library and every other accommodation we can give them, preserving, however, their independence of us and of each other.

Jefferson saw the enlightenment religion of Unitarianism as the religion of the future. It is clear he accepted this religion but did not want it to be favored either. In a letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, he wrote:

I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die an Unitarian.

We must say that Jefferson was the eternal optimist. When Jefferson wrote that he must be a Unitarian "by himself" he was talking about the classical form of Unitarianism, the belief in one God and Jesus as his son, but not God himself. This is the definition of Arianism, the 4<sup>th</sup> century priest and theologian who was banished by Constantine after the Council of Nicea. Jefferson once wrote: "Be this the wisdom of the Unitarians, that the holy mantle which shall cover within its charitable circumstances all who believe in one God and love their neighbor."

Wayne Arnason, when he was minister here, described Jefferson as a conservative Unitarian. By this he meant, Jefferson expressed the fundamental views of the first generation of Unitarianism in England and America—that God was one and we should follow the example of Jesus. We could also say these views were

the heart of Unitarianism in Transylvania and Poland as well. Wayne also admitted that Jefferson added a new dimension to his Unitarian views. He promoted something that John Adams did not: An optimistic view of human nature. Wayne wrote:

His vision of humankind and human potential had a dual nature, with potential for good and evil, but his personal testimony was consistently in support of human goodness. His faith in a creative and loving God led him to believe that human beings are capable of the goodness that is the essence of god. Our sin derives from our weakness, but we have been given the tools to correct that weakness: our conscience, our reason, and, also, our human community.

Will Franks, a Unitarian historian in Norfolk, summarized the relationship between Jefferson's religion and his political philosophy. He wrote: "Jefferson trusted a whole society more than any single individual. It is out of this basis, in religion, that Jefferson believed in political freedom and democratic government."

As we continue to discuss Thomas Jefferson, the way he lived, his views on slavery and race, we need to acknowledge his contributions to science, diplomacy, agriculture, philosophy, education, architecture, but especially his religion. This is the reason why this church was named after him. We should continue to look at how he lived compared to what he believed, but we should not forget these important accomplishments and the religious beliefs that caused him to make contributions to the political arena. Thank you.