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*Under God*  
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## ◊ THIRTY - ONE ◊

Jefferson:  
The Uses of Religion

JEFFERSON'S WORDS ARE PUT TO MANY USES IN DEBATE OVER THE RELATIONSHIP of church to state in America. We know more about his personal views on religion than we know about any other person's at the origin of our state. But our knowledge is drawn from sources denied to his contemporaries, who speculated widely about his "atheism" or made unfounded charges about his hostility to organized religion of all kinds. Echoes of those charges have haunted his reputation, even to this day. Fundamentalists have denounced his deism—or, with compensatory zeal, have co-opted him to the cause of a "Christian nation." A faculty member at Pat Robertson's CBN University even made Jefferson a conduit for the Christian views of Samuel Rutherford, the myth of whose influence is derived from Francis Schaeffer.<sup>1</sup>

Jefferson's views were sufficiently unorthodox for him to take care that they not become generally known. He refused to be drawn into a public defense of them, and he was chary about letting even the most trustworthy people see his private writings on Jesus, Christianity, and the churches. As he wrote to Benjamin Rush, when sending him his "Syllabus" on the ethics of Jesus:

In confiding it to you, I know it will not be exposed to the malignant perversions of those who make every word from me a text for new misrepresentations and calumnies. I am moreover averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public; because it would countenance the presumption of those who have endeavored to draw them before that tribunal, and to seduce public opinion to erect itself into that inquisition over the rights of conscience, which the laws have so justly proscribed [in America]. It behoves every man who values liberty of conscience for himself, to resist invasions of it in the case of others; or their case may, by change of circumstances, become his own. It behoves him, too, in his own case, to give no example of concession, betraying the common right of independent opinion, by answering questions of faith, which the laws have left between God and himself.<sup>2</sup>

Jefferson kept his library at Monticello locked; he opened it only to conduct favored guests through. His most compromising materials he carried with him. These texts were kept by his family throughout the nineteenth century, and were not published until this century—his Extracts from the Gospels in 1902, his Literary Commonplace Book in 1928, his (reconstructed) "Philosophy of Jesus" in 1983. Only with the help of these three works can Jefferson's views be adequately measured.

Jefferson kept his Literary Commonplace Book close to him throughout his life, and his family cherished it for this intimate association. He began to compile it as a teenager. It was with him when his first library was destroyed by fire at his mother's plantation house, Shadwell. Jefferson was twenty-seven years old. He sifted and rearranged its contents for a dozen or so years after that, and put it in its final binding before he left for Europe in 1784, where he used it in composing his treatise on poetic meters. The Library of Congress bought it from his descendants in 1918, and Gilbert Chinard first published it ten years later. Biographers made heavy use of it after that, but without knowing how to date the various entries. It was not till 1989 that Douglas Wilson's model edition made such dating possible.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson used the evidence of handwriting, binding, papers used, and the editions cited to show how carefully Jefferson preserved and rearranged the extracts he continued to value—principally the long passages copied out from Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke. (Originally, there were even more than the ten thousand words of Bolingbroke retained in Jefferson's final binding of his collection.) Bolingbroke is important here because he was considered a scandalously irreligious author in his day.

He did not publish his religious views in his own lifetime, and after his death (1751) pressure was brought on his executor to leave his "blasphemies" unpublished. Dr. Johnson denounced the five-volume edition of his work that appeared in 1754, when Jefferson was eleven. By 1765, when Jefferson was twenty-two, he had read all the five volumes and lovingly copied long passages from them, with special emphasis on philosophical materialism (which Jefferson held ever after), the denial of miracles and the supernatural, the absurdity of Jewish Scriptures, the arbitrariness of the Christian canon of "inspired" works. That Jefferson was entertaining dangerous thoughts we can see from the one place where he breaks into his copyings from Bolingbroke: He puts a confirming passage from David Hume right after Bolingbroke's argument that incest is not against natural law.<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson's general views on religion were formed by Bolingbroke, and he retained the major tenets copied into his book. This makes all the more startling the major departure from his mentor's views. Bolingbroke claimed, in words Jefferson wrote over again, that the ethical teachings of Jesus were less formed and systematic than those of pagan moralists. He said this could be proved if one collected the moral sayings from all four Gospels for comparison with similar collections from the sages:

Were all the precepts of this [ethical] kind, that are scattered about in the whole New Testament, collected, like the short sentences of ancient sages in the memorials we have of them, and put together in the very words of the sacred writers, they would compose a very short, as well as unconnected system of ethics. A system thus collected from the writings of ancient heathen moralists, of Tully [Cicero], of Seneca, of Epictetus and others, would be more full, more entire, more coherent, more clearly deduced from unquestionable principles of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

This passage helps explain the honor Jefferson gave to Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus among moral teachers he continued to consult. But, more than that, this paragraph gave Jefferson an assignment he carried out, years later, in two of his major efforts at ethical reflection: He made precisely the kind of collection from the Gospels that Bolingbroke had suggested (the "Philosophy" and "Extracts"), and he made a comparison of that collection with the teachings of the pagan moralists (the "Syllabus"). But Jefferson came to an exactly opposite conclusion from Bolingbroke's: He found that Jesus offered the better, more extensive, more systematic program of virtue. Bolingbroke claimed that a thorough investigation would show that Jesus offered no "unerring rule" of moral

duty; Jefferson concluded that Jesus was "a master workman" at forging an ethical teaching and

that his system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has been ever taught, and consequently more perfect [sic] than those of any of the ancient philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson did not always hold this view of Jesus. He could still describe him as the dupe of his own followers in 1787: "a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition."<sup>7</sup>

What made Jefferson change his mind about Jesus? Eugene Sheridan argues that it was the convergence of a number of things affecting Jefferson in his first term as president.<sup>8</sup> The works of Joseph Priestley had convinced him that Jesus was misrepresented by Christians after his death, and Priestley's "harmonies" of the various Gospel accounts set a model to Jefferson for making his own extracts of the "authentic" teachings of Jesus from the corrupt accounts of his life. But, more than that, the fierce divisions of the 1790s, and the vicious personal attacks on Jefferson, had driven him to seek hope from an ethics of positive charity. He found this in Jesus, and not in the classical self-improvers. As he wrote, midway through his first term as president, of the pagan moralists:

Their philosophy went chiefly to the government of our passions, so far as respected ourselves, and the procuring our own tranquility. On our duties to others they were short and deficient. They extended their cares scarcely beyond our kindred and friends individually, and our country in the abstract. Jesus embraced, with charity and philanthropy, our neighbors, our countrymen, and the whole family of mankind.<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson made his first parallel edition of extracts from the Gospels at this time, and tried to get Priestley and Benjamin Rush to publish the claims of Jesus' superiority to pagan sages, claims that he could not circulate in his own name but that he believed it important for the republic to acknowledge.<sup>10</sup> As Jefferson told Benjamin Rush in 1803, his views were

very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.<sup>11</sup>

Later, when Jefferson was preparing to make his more ambitious (multilingual) arrangement of Gospel extracts, he confessed to a correspondent his desire to make the world "see the immortal merit of this first of human sages."

I believe it may even do good by producing discussion and, finally, a true view of the merits of this great reformer.<sup>12</sup>

While Jefferson was compiling his larger version of the Gospel extracts, he wrote to Vine Utley: "I never go to bed without an hour or half hour's previous reading of something moral, whereon to ruminate in the intervals of sleep."<sup>13</sup>

As Jefferson became more ardent for the ethical doctrines of Jesus, his anger at priests for distorting his message was intensified. He hoped for the day when the authentic portrait he had assembled would be widely accepted. As he told Mrs. Samuel H. Smith, "there would never have been an infidel if there had never been a priest."<sup>14</sup> He took comfort from the growth of Unitarianism, an escape from what he considered the "polytheism" of trinitarian doctrine. He wrote to Timothy Pickering in 1821:

If nothing had ever been added to what flowed purely from his [Jesus'] lips, the whole world would at this day have been Christian. . . . Had there never been a Commentator, there never would have been an infidel.<sup>15</sup>

And to Thomas Whittemore, in 1822:

Had his doctrines, pure as they came from himself, been never sophisticated for unworthy purposes, the whole civilised world would at this day have formed but a single sect.<sup>16</sup>

To Benjamin Waterhouse, in 1822:

I rejoice that in this blessed country of free enquiry 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 there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die an Unitarian.<sup>17</sup>

To James Smith, in 1822:

The pure and simple unity of the creator of the universe is now all but ascendant in the Eastern states; it is dawning in the West, and advancing towards the South; and I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

Jefferson was not indifferent to the religion held by Americans. He wanted the true deism (monotheism) preached by Jesus to prevail. That

religion has political consequences. The religion of Jesus was democratic, since it let people maintain custody of their own consciences, not turning them over to priests, who base an authority over the conscience on mystification and ritual:

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ leveled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw, in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce to it profit, power and pre-eminence. The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for this obvious reason, that nonsense can never be explained.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus "corrected the deism of the Jews," returning them to the core of their monotheistic belief, apart from Temple cult and ritual.<sup>20</sup> But then the church councils of the third and fourth century brought back hocus-pocus, debating the double nature of Christ, the immateriality of spirit, the polytheistic trinity (the Athanasian paradox that one is three).<sup>21</sup>

But progress, Jefferson answered John Adams, will lead to a "euthanasia for Platonic Christianity, and its restoration to the primitive simplicity of its founder."<sup>22</sup> Jefferson was prepared to help along practitioners of the less corrupt forms of Christianity—the Presbyterians, for instance, or Quakers, who renounced bishops and priests—against the more superstitious (like Roman and Anglican Catholics):

The mild and simple principles of the Christian philosophy would produce too much calm, too much regularity of good, to extract from its disciples a support for a numerous priesthood, were they not to sophisticate [contaminate] it, ramify it, split it into hairs, and twist its texts till they cover the divine morality of its author with mysteries and require a priesthood to explain them. The Quakers seem to have discovered this. They have no priests, therefore no schisms. They judge of the text by the dictates of common sense and common morality.<sup>23</sup>

The politics of reformed Christianity versus episcopal Christianity lay behind Jefferson's uses of religion in the struggle for independence. Those who think he kept an absolute separation between his politics and religion will be shocked, as John Quincy Adams was, at the way he "cooked up" a religious protest at the British treatment of the colonies:

We were under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen as to passing events; and thought

that the appointment of a day of general fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention. No example of such a solemnity had existed since the days of our distresses in the [French and Indian] war of '55, since which a new generation had grown up. With the help therefore of Rushworth [records of Cromwell's days], whom we rummaged over for the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans of that [War of '55] day, preserved by him, we cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases; for appointing the first day of June, on which the Port bill was to commence, for a day of fasting, humiliation prayer, to implore heaven to avert from us the evils of civil war, to inspire us with firmness in support of our rights, and to turn the hearts of the King and parliament to moderation and justice. To give greater emphasis to our proposition, we agreed to wait the next morning on Mr. [Robert Carter] Nicholas, whose grave and religious character was more in unison with the tone of our resolution and to solicit him to move it.<sup>24</sup>

Going back to the French and Indian War was a shrewd move, since fear of Catholicism in Canada, and of convert Indians fighting with the "priest-ridden" French, had been a powerful motive in that war. And since England still had its own bishop-ruled liturgy, antipapal rhetoric could be turned against England during the Revolution—and it was. Jefferson himself was astonished at the success of his call for national prayer, and he kept that reaction in mind when it came time to write the Declaration of Independence.<sup>25</sup>

The revival of antipapal rhetoric during the Revolution was successful because of colonial resentment at the Quebec Act of 1773. England won Canada from France in the French and Indian War, which the colonies had treated as a crusade against the menace of Roman Catholicism on this continent, yet England granted Catholic Canadians the right to continue practicing their religion, even under the rule of an England that had an established Protestant religion. American zealots considered that a capitulation to "the Whore of Babylon." According to the puritan preacher Samuel Sherwood, in a famous Election Day sermon, the Quebec Act proved that "the ministry and parliament of Great Britain, which appears so favorable to popery and the Roman Catholic interest, [is] aiming at the extension and establishment of it."<sup>26</sup>

So strong was resentment against this act that New Englanders had made sure it was put in the colonies' declaration of rights at the First Continental Congress of 1774—even though it took some stretching to say that Parliament's toleration of a religion in one British province violated the rights of those in another province. Here is how the bill of

rights stated the colonies' interest in the matter: Their rights had been taken away, according to the text, by

the act passed in the same [parliamentary] session [as the Force Acts] for establishing the Roman Catholic religion in the province of Quebec, abolishing the equitable system of English laws, and erecting a tyranny there, to the great danger, from so total a dissimilarity of religions, law, and government to the neighboring British colonies, by the assistance of whose blood and treasure the said country was conquered from France.<sup>27</sup>

Though the delegates were careful to include the suspension of other British laws in Quebec, it is clear that the core grievance was the practice of Catholicism in contaminating proximity to the New England colonies. Naturally, the same congress put the Quebec Act in its petition to the king for redress of grievances, denouncing Parliament for "establishing an absolute government and the Roman Catholic religion throughout those vast regions [of Quebec], that border on the westerly and northerly boundaries of the free protestant English settlements."<sup>28</sup> The king would have to abolish the form of government in that other part of his dominion before the colonies would consider their rights restored.

Jefferson, knowing the power of this grievance among the Northern colonists, included it in his 1775 Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms: "They [Parliament] have erected in a neighboring province, acquired by the joint arms of Great Britain and America, a tyranny dangerous to the very existence of all these colonies."<sup>29</sup> He does not expressly mention religion, though that was the understood basis of complaint. In his own rough draft of the Declaration of Independence, he did not include the Quebec Act in his list of grievances, perhaps considering it not worthy of the international scrutiny that document would undergo. But members of the drafting committee (which included John Adams of Massachusetts) must have convinced him that important interests would not suffer it to be omitted. So the draft he submitted to Congress read this way:

He [King George] has combined with others [Parliament] to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitutions and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their [Parliament's] pretended [illegitimate] acts of legislation . . . for abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these colonies.<sup>30</sup>

Congress made no change in this part of Jefferson's draft except to regularize his idiosyncratic spelling and to substitute *states* for the last word in the item. Thus America declared its independence by—among other things—deploring the grant of free exercise to a religion held to the north of the aggrieved colonies.

Jefferson did not separate religion and politics while agitating for independence. Yet this was the very time when he was revising Virginia's laws to include religious freedom. How can we reconcile these activities on his part? Presumably he thought he could use Protestant fears of a hieratic and priestly church because he considered the latter inimical to freedom. But how could he, simultaneously, plan for the freedom of religion (including the Catholic religion) south of the Canadian border?