

The Fear, Honor, and Love of God: Thomas Jefferson on Jews, Philosophers, and Jesus

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ABSTRACT In a letter to Benjamin Rush, Jefferson includes a syllabus—a comparative account of the merits of Jewish morality, ancient philosophy, and the precepts of Jesus. Using the syllabus as a guide, this paper is a critical examination of the influence of ancient ethical and religious thinking on Jefferson’s ethical and religious thinking—viz., Jefferson’s views of the ethics and religion of the Hebrews, the ancient philosophers, and Jesus.

KEYWORDS Ancient Philosophy; benevolence; Jefferson, Thomas; Jesus’s morality; Jewish morality; moral sense

Now whoever does Good to another, does after some sort exist in that Person; and he who gives Being, manifestly lives and acts in that Being which is propagated by him.¹

Jefferson, in fulfilment of a promise he once made to Benjamin Rush to share his views on Christianity, writes his friend (21 Apr. 1803):² “They are the result of a life of inquiry & reflection, and 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 he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to him every *human* excellence; & believing he never claimed any other.”

Enclosed with the letter is a comparative account of the merits of Jewish morality, ancient philosophy, and the precepts of Jesus, in a précis titled

1. Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*, vol. 3, trans. George Stanhope (London: J. Tonson, J. Walthoe, R. Wilkin et al., 1729), 260.

2. There are several major compilations of Jefferson’s writings—e.g., (1) *The Writings of*

“A Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared with Those of Others.” The syllabus is a mere outline of Jefferson’s views, dashed together more to encourage “some one of more leisure and information for the task” than to presage a full articulation of Jefferson’s own views.

Using Jefferson’s “Syllabus” as a springboard, this paper offers a critical examination of the influence of ancient ethical and religious thinking on Jefferson’s ethical and religious thinking—viz., Jefferson’s views of the ethics and religion of the Hebrews, the ancient philosophers, and Jesus.

JEWISH MORALITY AND RELIGION

Jewish morality and religion Jefferson treats secondly in his “Syllabus,” after Ancient philosophy. Nonetheless it can profitably be treated first, as Jefferson has little to say that is positive.

II. Jews. 1. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief of one only God. But their ideas of him & of his attributes were degrading & injurious. 2. 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.

What the Jews got right was monotheism, but beyond that there is little that is savable. First they limn deity in a manner that is “degrading & in-

Thomas Jefferson: Being his Autobiography, Correspondence, Reports, Messages, Addresses, and Other Writings, Official and Private; Published by the Order of the Joint Committee of Congress on the Library, from the Original Manuscripts, Deposited in the Department of State, 9 vols., ed. Henry Augustine Washington (Washington: Taylor & Maury, 1853–4), (2) *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 12 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1902); (3) *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Definitive Edition*, 20 vols., ed. Andrew Adgate Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907); and (4) *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 42 vols. (to date), ed. Julian Boyd et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–). There are also several one-volume compilations of Jefferson’s writings—the best of which is Merrill D. Peterson’s *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984). Moreover, many of Jefferson’s writings are readily available online—e.g., Hathi Trust Digital Library, The Online Library of Liberty, and Founders Online. Thus, I adopt the convention here, as in other publications, of labeling Jefferson’s writings by reference only to date (for letters, his correspondent and the date of the letter), thereby giving readers the opportunity to refer to the edition most readily available to them.

jurious.” Next, they endorse intercourse only within the community, and treat others and other nations with enmity.

Overall, the terseness of the account says more, I suspect, than expatiation of the defects could ever say. Jefferson thinks the shortcomings so pronounced that expatiation on them would be wastage of time. Jefferson, I suspect, would not disagree with Richard Dawkins summation. “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”³

Elsewhere Jefferson elaborates on the defects of Jewish morality and religion. Following the work of William Enfield, Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams (12 Oct. 1813), notes that the Law of Moses contains 613 precepts, 248 of which affirmative and 365 of which are negative. “It may serve to give the reader some idea of the law state of moral philosophy among the Jews in the Middle age, to add, that of the 248. affirmative precepts, only 3. were considered as obligatory upon women,” he quotes from Enfield, “and that, in order to obtain salvation, it was judged sufficient to fulfill any one single law in the hour of death; the observance of the rest being deemed necessary, only to increase the felicity of the future life. What a wretched depravity of sentiment and manners must have prevailed before such corrupt maxims could have obtained credit! It is impossible to collect from these writings a consistent series of moral Doctrine.”

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

Embracing the Circles of Kindred & Friends

Of the ancient philosophers—i.e., ancient ethicians—Jefferson writes:

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

I. Philosophers. 1. Their precepts related chiefly to ourselves, and the government of those passions which, unrestrained, would disturb our tranquility of mind. In this branch of philosophy they were really great. 2. In developing our duties to others, they were short and defective. They embraced,

3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 1st Mariner Books ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 51.

indeed, the circles of kindred & friends, and inculcated patriotism or the love of our country in the aggregate, as a primary obligation: toward 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.

There are two oddities: Jefferson's particular grouping of philosophers and Jefferson's statement that such ethicists were defective in their account of humans' duty to other humans.

The first oddity is Jefferson's pick of philosophers, which is in some regard a dog's breakfast. Inclusion of Epicurus and the Stoics Epictetus, Seneca, and Aurelius is graspable, for Jefferson dubbed himself in a letter to William Short (19 Oct. 1819) a disciple of Epicurus, and he was particularly fond of reading the Stoics—especially early and later in life, when time for the luxury of reading for pleasure and personal benefit allowed. Why are Socrates and Pythagoras, to whom Jefferson seldom refers in his corpus, included and Plato and Aristotle ignored? One might understand exclusion of Plato, given Jefferson's express execration of Plato,⁴ due to the inflexibility of his writings and the mistaken belief that Plato was an unoriginal compiler, *inter alia*.⁵ Jefferson also states Aristotle's political views are obsolete, and includes him with Plato in a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse (13 Oct. 1815) as a mystic whose "jargon" is responsible for the corruption of Jesus's teachings.⁶ Nonetheless, Jefferson's own views on happiness have certain affinities with Aristotle's—the most salient affinity being that neither thinks virtue is sufficient for happiness.⁷ Thus, one would like some rationale for the philosophers Jefferson culls. None is given.

The second oddity concerns a vital defect of the systems of the ancient philosophers—overpassing "duty to others." Here Jefferson seems querulous and unfair, as the objection applies to Pythagoreans, Socrates, and perhaps even Epicurus, but not to Cicero and the three Stoics. Pythagoreans were social only insofar as their secretive, exclusive activities within their cult were social. Socrates's pursuit of virtue was self-serving and selfish, as the thesis he endorsed, virtue is knowledge, debarred any sort of meaningful social activities other than the pursuit of virtue through

4. E.g., TJ to John Adams, 5 July 1814. Cf. TJ to John Adams, 10 Dec. 1819.

5. See M. Andrew Holowchak, "Jefferson's Platonic Republicanism," *Polis* (forthcoming).

6. TJ to Isaac H. Tiffany, 6 Aug. 1816.

7. For more, see M. Andrew Holowchak, *Thomas Jefferson: Uncovering His Unique Philosophy and Vision* (Prometheus Books, 2014).

elenctic dialog with absorbed interlocutors. Epicurean communities were social only insofar adherents of his doctrines gathered in schools to study his precepts to seek peace of mind, yet peace of mind (*ataraxia*) entailed pococurantism concerning political issues.

Yet the writings of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius show great regard for duty to others. Ancient ethical theory of the virtue-ethics sort is centered on regard for others. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics—Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius were Stoics, and Cicero, though categorized today as eclectic with great partiality for Academic Skepticism, had marked Stoic leanings—were committed to the social nature of humans, so happiness was inevitably social, and each believed pursuit of virtue was linked with human happiness. For illustration, many of the numerous virtues listed by Seneca in his varied writings are ineliminably social: e.g., friendship (*amicitia*), right giving and receiving benefits (*beneficium*), friendliness (*comitas*), trust (*fides*), courage (*fortitudo*), humanity (*humanitas*), generosity (*liberalitas*), regard for what is lawful (*legitimum*), magnanimity (*magnanimitas*), sympathy (*miserecordia*), piety (*pietas*), practical wisdom (*prudentia*), and forbearance (*tolerantia*).⁸ What precisely does Jefferson find exceptionable? One might conclude, as does Paul Conkin, that Jefferson's judgments vis-à-vis the ancients were unfair, as "Jefferson began with a stacked deck."⁹

That assessment is harefooted. To get clearer on precisely what Jefferson finds objectionable, let us flesh out, as best we can, what can be called Jefferson's Circle-of-Benevolence Argument.¹⁰ Ancient ethical precepts aim at control of those passions that, if untethered, would disturb equanimity. So, ancient ethical precepts are sufficient to motivate right

8. The Stoic philosopher Hierocles explained how Stoic integration in the cosmos occurs through 10 concentric circles that bind people locally and globally. "The first and closest circle is one that a person has drawn as though around a center—his own mind. That circle encloses the body and anything taken for the sake of the body. It is virtually the smallest circle and it almost touches the center itself. Next, the second one, further removed from the center but enclosing the first circle, contains parents, siblings, wife, and children. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The next circle (4) includes the other relatives, and that is followed by (5) the circle of local residents, then (6) the circle of fellow-demes-men, next (7) that of fellow-citizens, and then (8) in the same way the circle of people from neighboring towns, and (9) the circle of fellow-countrymen. The outermost and largest circle (10), which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race." Stobaeus, *Anthology*, IV.671.7–673.11.

9. Paul K. Conkin, "The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1993), 37.

10. See M. Andrew Holowchak, *Dutiful Correspondent: Philosophical Essays on Thomas Jefferson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 96.

self-concerned behavior. Yet the ancients wrote of the “circles of kindred & friends,” and “inculcated patriotism . . . in the aggregate” as primary obligations. Yet, though they spoke of justice toward neighbors and countrymen, they did not include or merely insufficiently included them in the circle of benevolence. Neither did they inculcate peace, charity, and love of fellow men nor did they embrace with benevolence all mankind. It follows that ancient ethical precepts are insufficient to motivate right other-concerned behavior. Therefore, ancient ethical precepts are sufficient to motivate right self-concerned activity, but not right other-concerned activity. Thus, Jefferson does not find lack of other-concern exceptional, but lack of other-concern, motivated by benevolence, exceptional.

Duty to others, for the ancients according to Jefferson, is essentially self-concerned. One acts with regard to the interests of others only because, acting thus, one derives benefits—i.e., equanimity. That is why he finds Jesus’s precepts superior to that of the ancients. Jefferson writes to William Short (19 Oct. 1819), “Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves, Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others.” Consequently, other-concern must be founded on benevolence—something Jefferson doubtless confirmed in the writings of Francis Hutcheson and Pierre Charron, among other roughly coetaneous thinkers.¹¹

What the Circle-of-Benevolence Argument shows is that ancient ethical theory at its best is incomplete: It explains *amour propre*, but *amour propre* without genuine other-love is insufficient. Yet incompleteness is at bottom not Jefferson’s gripe: inadequacy is. We shall see why when we turn to Jesus’s teachings.

Ancient Ethicians and Virtue

Notwithstanding what he construed as the lack of benevolence-motivated actions in ancient ethical thinking, Jefferson had unusual regard for ancient authors—especially ancient ethicians. He found in them great incentive for morally correct action, and he found singular enjoyment in reading them in Greek or Latin.¹² His library contained the ethical works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Xenophon, Alexander Aphrodisias, Maximus of Tyre, and the Stoics Epictetus, Antoninus, and Seneca, among others. His recommended reading-list to John Minor (30 Aug. 1814) includes Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, *On Duties*, *On Old Age*, and *The*

11. Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1725), 116–7; and Charron, *Of Wisdom*, vol. 3, 1089.

12. See esp. TJ to John Brazier, 24 Aug. 1819.

Dream of Scipio and Seneca's *Philosophica* under the rubric "Ethics and Natural Religion."

Moreover, references to virtuous activity, of the sort I list from the writings of Seneca, abound in Jefferson's writings. It is aidful here to give a brief illustration of Jefferson's debt to the ancient ethicists, their defects notwithstanding, by listing some of the virtues Jefferson considered worth integrating in daily living.

AUTHENTICITY "I know but one code of morality for men, whether acting singly or collectively," Jefferson writes to James Madison (28 Aug. 1789). "He who says I will be a rogue when I act in company with a hundred others, but an honest man when I act alone, will be believed in the former assertion, but not in the latter." Years later, he says to Francis Wayles Eppes (21 May 1816): "Never suffer a thought to be harbored in your mind which you would not avow openly. When tempted to do any thing in secret, ask yourself if you would do it in public."¹³

CALMNESS Jefferson tells his daughter Mary (11 Apr. 1790), "Never be angry with any body, nor speak harm of them, try to let every body's faults be forgotten, as you would wish yours to be." "Whenever you feel a warmth of temper rising, check it at once, and suppress it, recollecting it will make you unhappy within yourself, and disliked by others," he writes to Francis Wayles Eppes (21 May 1816). "Nothing gives one person so great advantage over another, as to remain always cool and unruffled under all circumstances."¹⁴

CEREMONY To Gov. James Sullivan (19 June 1807), Jefferson expresses contempt for ceremony: "I confess that I am not reconciled to the idea of a chief magistrate parading himself through the several States as an object of public gaze, and in quest of an applause which, to be valuable, should be purely voluntary. I had rather acquire silent good-will by a faithful discharge of my duties, than owe expressions of it to my putting myself in the way of receiving them."

CHARITY "Take more pleasure in giving what is best to another than in having it yourself, and then all the world will love you, and I more than all the world," Jefferson advises his daughter Mary (11 Apr. 1790). To Drs. Rogers and Slaughter (2 Mar. 1806), he speaks of charity as a moral duty: "I deem it the duty of every man to devote a certain portion of his income

13. See also TJ to Edmund Randolph, 17 Sept. 1792; TJ to William Hamilton, 22 Apr. 1800; Second Annual Message, 15 Dec. 1802; Second Inaugural Address, 4 Mar. 1805; TJ to Don Vanentine de Feronda, 4 Oct. 1809; and TJ to Albert Gallatin, 24 Apr. 1811.

14. See also TJ to Ellen Wayles Randolph, 27 Nov. 1801; TJ James Fishback, 27 Sept. 1809; and TJ to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, 24 Nov. 1808.

for charitable purposes; and that it is his further duty to see it so applied as to do the most good of which it is capable. This I believe to be best insured, by keeping within the circle of his own inquiry and information the subjects of distress to whose relief his contributions shall be applied.”¹⁵

COMPROMISE / CONCILIATION “People can never agree without some sacrifices,” Jefferson says laconically to the Marquis de Lafayette (6 May 1789). As president, he writes to John Randolph (1 Dec. 1803) that conciliation is necessary, because of the imperfection of reason. “I see too many proofs of the imperfection of human reason, to entertain wonder or intolerance at any difference of opinion on any subject; and acquiesce in that difference as easily as on a difference of feature or form; experience having long taught me the reasonableness of mutual sacrifices of opinion among those who are to act together for any common object, and the expediency of doing what good we can, when we cannot do all we would wish.”¹⁶

HARMONY “It is so important to each to continue to please the other, that the happiness of both requires the most pointed attention to whatever may contribute to it, and the more as time makes greater inroads on our person,” Jefferson writes to his daughter Mary Jefferson Eppes (7 Jan. 1798). He continues: “Yet generally we become slovenly in proportion as personal decay requires the contrary. . . . Cultivate their affections, my dear, with assiduity. Think every sacrifice a gain which shall tend to attach them to you.”¹⁷

HONESTY Jefferson castigates King George III in his “Summary View”: “The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty and mankind will give you credit where you fail.” To Edward Rutledge (27 Dec. 1796), he says, “I love to see honest and honorable men at the helm, men who will not bend their politics to their purses, nor pursue measures by which they may profit, & then profit by their measures.” “Honesty and interest are as intimately connected in the public as in the private code of morality,” Jefferson says to James Maury (15 June 1815).¹⁸

15. See also TJ to Samuel Kercheval, 19 Jan. 1810; TJ to Charles Christian, 21 Mar. 1812; and TJ to Michael Megear, 29 May 1823.

16. TJ to James Monroe, 7 Mar. 1801; TJ to Horatio Gates, 8 Mar. 1801; TJ to Samuel Adams, 29 Mar. 1801; and TJ to John Dickinson, 23 July 1801.

17. See also TJ to Mary Jefferson Eppes, 7 Jan. 1789; TJ to Archibald Stuard, 18 Apr. 1795; and TJ to Mary Jefferson Eppes, 1 Jan. 1799.

18. See also TJ to James Monroe, 18 Mar. 1785; TJ to Peter Carr, 19 Aug. 1785; TJ to Ezra Stiles, 1 Sept. 1786; TJ to William Branch Giles, 31 Dec. 1795; TJ to Jeremiah Moor, 14 Aug. 1800; TJ to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 1801; TJ to William B. Giles, 23 Mar. 1801; TJ to Thomas

JUSTICE “The administration of justice is a branch of the sovereignty over a country, and belongs exclusively to the nation inhabiting it,” Jefferson writes to George Hammond (29 May 1792). “No foreign power can pretend to participate in their jurisdiction, or that their citizens received there are not subject to it. When a cause has been adjudged according to the rules & forms of the country, it’s justice ought to be presumed.” To James Maury (25 Apr. 1812), Jefferson says: “We believe that the just standing of all nations is the health and security of all. We consider the overwhelming power of England on the ocean, and of France on the land, as destructive of the prosperity and happiness of the world, and wish both to be reduced only to the necessity of observing moral duties.”¹⁹

PRUDENCE Jefferson advises daughter Martha (14 June 1787) to be prudent. “You propose this to me as an anticipation of five weeks allowance. But do you not see my dear how imprudent it is to lay out in one moment what should accommodate you for five weeks? That this is a departure from that rule which I wish to see you governed by, thro’ your whole life, of never buying any thing which you have not money in your pocket to pay for?”

RESIGNATION / TOLERANCE “The most fortunate of us, in our journey through life, frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us,” Jefferson writes to John Page (5 July 1763), “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 its force after it has fallen.” “[My family’s] affectionate devotion to me makes a willingness to endure life a duty, as long as it can be of any use to them,” Jefferson says to grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph (8 Feb. 1826).²⁰

MODESTY / FRUGALITY “I had rather be shut up in a very modest cottage, with my books, my family and a few old friends,” Jefferson writes to Alexander Donald (7 Feb. 1788), “dining on simple bacon, and letting the

Leiper, 1 Jan. 1814; TJ to Dr. George Logan, 12 Nov. 1816; TJ to Francois de Marbois, 14 June 1817; and TJ to Nathaniel Macon, 12 Jan. 1819.

19. See also TJ to William Short, 28 July 1791; TJ to Edmond Charles Genet, 12 Sept. 1793; TJ to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 4 Oct. 1803; TJ to George Ticknor, 25 Nov. 1817; and TJ to Robert Walsh, 4 Dec. 1818.

20. See also TJ to Mary Jefferson Eppes, 7 Jan. 1789; TJ to Abigail Adams, 11 Jan. 1817; TJ to William Short, 31 Oct. 1819; and TJ to John Adams, 22 Jan. 1821.

world roll on as it liked than to occupy the most splendid post which any human power can give.”

SOCIABILITY / FRIENDSHIP / GOODWILL “Life is of no value but as it brings us gratifications,” Jefferson says to James Madison (20 Feb. 1784). “Among the most valuable of these is rational society. It informs the mind, sweetens the temper, cheers [*sic*] our spirits, and promotes health.” To St. George Tucker (10 Sept. 1793), he says: “What an ocean is life! And how our barks get separated in beating through it! One of the greatest comforts of the retirement to which I shall soon withdraw will be its rejoining me to my earliest and best friends, and acquaintance.” “I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend,” Jefferson tells William Hamilton (22 Apr. 1800).²¹

TRANQUILITY “Tranquillity [*sic*] is the *summum bonum* of old age, and there is a time when it is a duty to leave the government of the world to the existing generation, and to repose one’s self under their protecting hand. That time is come with me, and I welcome it,” Jefferson tells Samuel H. Smith (2 Aug. 1823). That is a sentiment he iterates to John Melish (13 Jan. 1813) and to Judge Spencer Roane (6 Sept. 1819).

TRUTH Jefferson writes to nephew Peter Carr (19 Aug. 1785): “It is of great importance to set a resolution, not to be shaken, never to tell an untruth. There is no vice so mean, so pitiful, so contemptible; and he who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and a third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world’s believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions.” Truth was also indispensable for preserving republican government. He writes to Judge John Tyler (28 June 1804): “I hold it, therefore, certain, that to open the doors of truth, and to fortify the habit of testing everything by reason, are the most effectual manacles we can rivet on the hands of our successors to prevent their manacling the people with their own consent. The panic into which they were artfully thrown in 1798, the frenzy which was excited in them by their enemies against their apparent

21. See also TJ to Maria Cosway, 27 Aug. 1786; TJ to Abigail Adams, 7 Feb. 1787; TJ to Mrs. John Bowling, 23 July 1787; TJ to A. Donald, 28 July 1788; TJ to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 17 July 1790; TJ to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 8 May 1791; TJ to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 22 June 1792; TJ to William Branch Giles, 27 Apr. 1795; TJ to Anne Cary, Thomas Jefferson, and Ellen Wayles Randolph, 2 Mar. 1802; TJ to J.F. Mercer, 1804; TJ to James Monroe, 18 Feb. 1808; TJ to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, 24 Nov. 1808; TJ to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 17 Aug. 1811; and TJ to Marquis de Lafayette, 20 Jan. 1811. For friendship between nations, see TJ to George Hammond, 9 Sept. 1793; First Inaugural Address, 1801; Third Annual Message, 17 Oct. 1803; and Fourth Annual Message, 7 Nov. 1804.

readiness to abandon all the principles established for their own protection, seemed for awhile to countenance the opinions of those who say they cannot be trusted with their own government. But I never doubted their rallying; and they did rally much sooner than I expected. On the whole, that experiment on their credulity has confirmed my confidence in their ultimate good sense and virtue.” To Rev. Knox (1810), Jefferson says: “Truth and reason are eternal. They have prevailed. And they will eternally prevail, however, in times and places they may be overborne for a while by violence—military, civil, or ecclesiastical.”²²

WISDOM “A wise man, if nature has not formed him honest, will yet act as if he were honest: because he will find it the most advantageous & wise part in the long run,” Jefferson says to James Monroe (18 Mar. 1785). “It is not wisdom alone, but public confidce in that wisdom which can support an admn,” writes Jefferson to James Monroe (18 July 1824).

JESUS’S DOCTRINES

The superiority of Jesus’s teachings on religion and morality to those of the Jews and ancient philosophers is evident in Jefferson’s pleonastic account of the life of Jesus and of his teachings. He writes in his “Syllabus”:

III. Jesus. In this state of things among the Jews Jesus appeared. His parentage was obscure; his condition poor; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct and innocent: he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, & of the sublimest eloquence.

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 Arrian²³ to write for him. On the contrary, all the learned of his country, entrenched in its power and riches, were opposed to him, lest his labors should undermine their advantages; and the committing to writing his life & doctrines fell on the most unlettered & ignorant men; who wrote, too, from memory, & not till long after the transactions had passed. 3. According to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten

22. Bill for Religious Freedom, 1779; *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787; Second Inaugural Address, 1805; TJ to William Duane, 1806; TJ to Thomas Seymour, 1807; TJ to William Short, 1808; TJ to Dr. Maese, 15 Jan. 1809; TJ to Capt. Isaac Hillard, 9 Oct. 1810; TJ to President James Madison, 23 Mar. 1815; TJ to Dr. George Logan, 12 Nov. 1816; TJ to John Quincy Adams, 1817; TJ to John Adams, 1819; TJ to William Roscoe, 27 Dec. 1820; and TJ to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825.

23. Xenophon wrote on Socrates; Arrian, on Epictetus and Alexander the Great.

and reform mankind, he fell an early victim to the jealousy & combination of the altar and the throne, at about 33. years of age, his reason having not yet attained the *maximum* of its energy, nor the course of his preaching, which was but of 3. years at most, presented occasions for developing a complete system of morals. 4. 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, misstated, & often unintelligible. 5. 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 Grecian sophist, frittering them into subtleties, & obscuring them with jargon, until they have caused good men to reject the whole in disgust, & to view Jesus himself as an impostor.

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 [system of morals] 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. 1. 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. 2. 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, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids. A development of this head will evince the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others. 3. The precepts of philosophy, & of the Hebrew code, laid hold of actions only. He pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal in the region of his thoughts, and purified the waters at the fountain head. 4. He taught, emphatically, the doctrines of a future state, which was either doubted, or disbelieved by the Jews; and wielded it with efficacy, as an important incentive, supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct.

There is much in the package that needs unpacking apropos of the difficulties in knowing precisely what Jesus taught and estimating the “intrinsic merits of his doctrines.”

The difficulties are as follows. First, Jesus wrote nothing and, having all the learned men against him, the job of preserving his teachings fell upon the unlettered and ignorant, who wrote of his life and lessons from memory and long after Jesus had died. Second, Jesus was put to death prior to the prime of his rationality. He preached only for some three years. The implications are that the best was yet to come and that his teachings were defective, presumably insofar as he did not have time to formulate a complete system. From the first and second points, we can conclude that the fragments we now have are “mutilated, misstated, & often unintelligible.” Third, in addition to the problems of incompleteness, mutilation, misstatement, and unintelligibility due to preservation by the unlettered and ignorant, there is the problem of political contamination. His teachings were “disfigured by the corruptions of schismatising followers.” We might call these difficulties the problems of preservation, incompleteness, and misrepresentation (here unintentional) and slanting (here intentional).

Difficulties notwithstanding, Jefferson intimates that Jesus’s teachings, incomplete as they are, can be extricated from the gallimaufry, and once extricated, the “rich fragments” are comprised of “the most perfect and sublime [system of morals] that has ever been taught by man.”

The merits of Jesus’s rich fragments are as follows. First, they confirm the monotheism of the Jews and correct the Jews apropos of deity’s attributes and actions. Second, they greatly outstrip the precepts of the Jews and are “more pure & perfect” than the best of the ancient ethicists insofar as Jesus preached universal philanthropy “not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids.” Third, they outstrip those of the ancient philosophers and Jews in that they consider not only actions or ends, but also intentions or means.²⁴ Fourth, Jesus preached the existence of life after death and used it as “an important incentive” for morally correct action. We might call these the principles of monotheism, intemperateness, benevolence, and futurity.

In the next two sections, I expatiate and offer a critical commentary both on disentangling Jesus’s true precepts from the farrago that Jefferson thinks is the New Testament and on assessing the merits of Jesus’s precepts.

24. See also TJ to Edward Dowse, 19 Apr. 1803.

“Diamonds in a Dunghill”: Cutting Out Verse by Verse

The problems of preservation, incompleteness, misrepresentation, and slanting are blubbery and considerable. Nonetheless, Jefferson thought the process of extricating Jesus’s genuine teachings from the corruptions and misrepresentations is simple. He writes at length to John Adams (12 Oct. 1813):

In extracting the pure principles which he taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to them. We must dismiss the Platonists and Plotinists, the Stagyrates and Gamalielites, the Eclectics the Gnostics and Scholastics, their essences and emanations, their Logos and Demi-urgos,²⁵ Aeons and Daemons male and female, with a long train of Etc. Etc. Etc. or, shall I say at once, of Nonsense. We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologisms into which they have been led by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.

Jefferson then states that he has “performed this operation” for himself “by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging, the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”²⁶ The *recherché* result was a book, 46 pages in length, “of pure and unsophisticated doctrines, such as were professed and acted on by the unlettered apostles, the Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1st. century.” The book, titled *The Philosophy of Jesus Extracted from the Text of the Evangelists*, has yet to be found, if it still exists.²⁷

“We find in the writings of his biographers matter of two distinct descriptions,” Jefferson writes to William Short (4 Aug. 1820) years later. “First, a groundwork of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticisms and fabrications. Intermixed with these, again, are sublime ideas of the Supreme Being, aphorisms and precepts of the purest morality and

25. Literally “word” or “account” and “Craftsman,” Plato’s conception of a creator-deity in his *Timaeus*.

26. A metaphor he repeats to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 25 Apr. 1816, and William Short, 31 Oct. 1819.

27. See also TJ to Charles Thomson, 9 Jan. 1816.

benevolence, sanctioned by a life of humility, innocence and simplicity of manners, neglect of riches, absence of worldly ambition and honors, with an eloquence and persuasiveness which have not been surpassed." The suggestion is that finding the "diamonds" of Jesus is as easy as separating what is simple and sublime from what is supernatural and aureate.

"When Livy or Siculus . . . tell us thing which coincide with our experience of the order of nature," Jefferson continues in the letter to Short, "we credit them on their word, and place their narrations among the records of credible history. But when they tell us of calves speaking, of statues sweating blood, and other things against the course of nature, we reject these as fables, not belonging to history. In like manner, when an historian, speaking of a character well known and established on satisfactory testimony imputes to it things incompatible with that character, we reject them without hesitation, and assent to that only of which we have better evidence." Thus, it is merely a matter of not allowing the New Testament any privileged status. Scholars need merely to approach the work with the same regard for rigor they would apply to any other historical work. "[The] free exercise of reason is all I ask for the vindication of the character of Jesus."

Reason is, of course, to be guided by experience. Experience shows especially that testimony of a particular character must be consistent with the laws of nature²⁸ and it must be consistent with other, reliable reports of a person's character. Apropos of the former, Jefferson has Conyers Middleton²⁹ and Lord Bolingbroke³⁰ in mind, and perhaps also David Hume's essay "On Miracles." Because a miracle is essentially a violation of a law of nature, it is always much more probable that one's testimony of the "miracle" is erroneous, rather than that a law of nature has been violated.³¹

It is plain that Jefferson has a historical aim. He desires to correct the inadequacies of Jesus's chroniclers and slanters and to give as correct account of Jesus's doctrines as is possible, given the problems of preservation and incompleteness. Yet Jefferson also has a normative aim. Given some degree of success in his historical aim, he desires to preserve for posterity "the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which

28. TJ to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 25 Apt. 1816; and to Daniel Salmon, 15 Feb. 1808.

29. He had in mind especially *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers in the Christian Church* (1750). Jefferson had in his library Middleton's four-volume *Miscellaneous Works*, published posthumously in 1752, and he cites him in a letter to John Adams, 22 Aug. 1813.

30. Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Princeton University Press, 1989), § 22-7.

31. David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 111.

has ever fallen from the lips of man.” Though Jefferson miniaturizes the project with his diamonds-in-a-dunghill metaphor, the enormity of what he is undertaking cannot be exaggerated. Not only is he challenging biblical literalists worldwide, he is also aiming to leave to posterity, through his surgical process, a précis of what he takes to be, as he says in his “Syllabus,” “the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.” Christ for Jefferson is not a son of deity, but a mere man with a timeless moral message.³²

Laying the Foundation for Liberty: The Doctrines of Jesus

Once the incredible, hyperbolic, and supernatural are eliminated from Jesus’s actions in the New Testament, one is left with the intemperate precepts of Jesus, insofar as the unlettered and ignorant chroniclers have faithfully preserved them for posterity.³³

The main precept is monotheism. “The religion of Jesus is founded in the Unity of God,” Jefferson writes to Jarred Sparks (4 Nov. 1822), “and this principle chiefly, gave it triumph over the rabble of heathen gods then acknowledged. Thinking men of all nations rallied readily to the doctrine of one only God, and embraced it with the pure-morals which Jesus inculcated.”

Others are in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. Jefferson, to George Thatcher (26 Jan. 1824), speaks with gratitude of having received from his correspondent the sermon from a certain Mr. Pierpoint. The sermon preaches “brotherly forbearance in matters of religion” and it distinguishes clearly between “the things which belong to us to judge, and those which do not.” Jefferson then bids all persons to “rally to the Sermon on the mount, make that the central point of Union in religion, and the stamp of genuine Christianity, (since it gives us all the precepts of our duties to one another).” I quote Matthew 5:3–12 from the *New International Version* of the Bible. Jesus said:

32. See George Harmon Knoles, “The Religious Ideas of Thomas Jefferson,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 30, no. 2 (1943): 96.

33. Jefferson did just those things in two compilations of biblical extracts by him—*The Philosophy of Jesus* (1804; no surviving copies) and *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (c. 1819). In the latter, Jefferson excises all supernatural acts that are attributed to Christ in the New Testament—it begins with the birth of Christ and excises any mention of a virgin birth and ends with his death and without mention of a resurrection—but does include several references to supernature. For instance, at 3.8, Jesus mentions that God knows what men want before they pray to Him and at 3.10 Jesus speaks of the afterlife. Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2011).

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

From Matthew 5:21–7:6, Jesus preaches against murder, adultery, divorce, eye-for-an-eye actions, material concerns, and judging others. He advocates love of enemies, prayer, and fasting.

Once one grasps the significance of the Sermon on the Mount, Jefferson continues to Thatcher, if anyone should ask, “What think ye of Christ?” it matters little whether one responds, “He is a member of the God-head,” “He is a being of eternal pre-existence,” “He was a man divinely inspired,” or, as Jefferson himself would answer, “He was the Herald of truths reformatory of the religions of mankind in general.” Jefferson sums, “I say with the wiser heathen *deorum injuriæ, diis curæ*.”³⁴

To Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse (26 June 1822), Jefferson states that the doctrines of Jesus, tending to the happiness of all humans, are simple. He begins, once again, with belief in one and a perfect god. Next, he asserts belief in “a future state of rewards and punishments.” Finally, the “sum of religion” is the injunction to love god unconditionally and to love all others as oneself.

Jesus’s teachings—few in number, intemperate, and incomplex—are then contrasted with the “demoralizing dogmas” of Calvin. Calvin maintains that the number of gods are three, that benevolence and beneficence are *hors de propos*, that faith is “everything,” while reason is nothing, and that the measure of faith is in inverse relationship to the comprehensibility of any religious proposition, and finally that salvation is a matter of foreordination such that virtuous and vicious actions are adiaphorous.

Here some comments are in order on the issues of monotheism, incompleteness, and sectarianism, and the last two can be treated by getting clear on monotheism.

34. “Injuries of the gods are concerns to the gods.”

Why did Jefferson lobby so much for monotheism? There are two separate questions here. First, why monotheism and not polytheism? Second, there is the issue of unitarianism versus trinitarianism. The notion of trinitarianism, Jefferson asserts in keeping with Joseph Priestley in his *An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*, was “nowhere expressly declared by any of the earliest fathers, & was never affirmed or taught by the Church before the Council of Nice.”³⁵

Jefferson’s silence on the first question is disoblging, so one is left to speculate. As David Hume shows,³⁶ no appeal to reason is logically prohibitive of polytheism. The arguments Jefferson does give on behalf of a deity, completely material, that creates and superintends the cosmos work just as well for monotheism as for polytheism. Thus, there is smugness in Jefferson’s claim that the Jews at least got right the notion of one god, for it is unclear what rides on this solution to the conundrum of the number of deities. The chief merit of monotheism is metaphysical economy and so one can assume that Jefferson made purchase of such economy, but assumption gives us little. We are left in the dark.

Jefferson does speak out on the second question. He finds the notion of three deities in one inscrutable and, therefore, physically impossible. Here he falls back on his naturalism. He allows nothing inconsistent with the laws of nature, gleaned through experience. Yet there is more. The sort of “unitarianism” Jefferson promotes is not a religious sect—for the Unitarianism of Jefferson’s day had its own metaphysical difficulties³⁷—but instead a manner of approaching religion.³⁸ Of his unitarianism, Jefferson asserts to John Adams (22 Aug. 1813), “We should all then, like the Quakers, live without an order of priests, moralize for ourselves, follow the oracle of conscience, and say nothing about what no man can understand,

35. Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on Religion,” 1776.

36. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

37. E.g., Unitarians essay to escape the charge of idolatry by asserting that Christ is maker and superintendant of the cosmos, but a lesser being than God—viz., there is only one God. Yet making and superintending the cosmos, Joseph Priestley states, show “greatness of power,” and if “God” means anything, it means greatness of power. So, Christ too, on the Unitarian hypothesis, must be a god. Joseph Priestley, *An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers; Proving that the Christian Church was at First Unitarian* (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1786), 73–5.

38. Peterson states that Jefferson adhered to the three Unitarian principles—freedom of mind and spirit, tolerance of religious difference, and trust in reason and science—but notes that his revisions to the Bible would have been heretical for the Unitarians of his day. Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 303.

nor therefore believe; for I suppose belief to be the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.” To Benjamin Waterhouse (26 June 1822), belief in one god is inseparably linked with loving one’s fellow man. To Dr. Thomas Cooper (2 Nov. 1822), Jefferson contrasts Unitarians with sectarian preachers. Later to Waterhouse (8 Jan. 1825), Jefferson states that Unitarianism is “primitive Christianity, in all the simplicity in which it came from the lips of Jesus.” Such letters show plainly that monotheism, incompleteness, and non-sectarianism are dependent issues. Jefferson made purchase of monotheism because it and benevolence were key tenets of Jesus’s simple teachings. Those two tenets, he believes, are the framework of any right religion.³⁹

Jefferson’s purchase of the teachings of Jesus was not complete and unconditioned. “It is not to be understood that I am with [Jesus] in all of his doctrines,” he writes to William Short (13 Apr. 1820). “I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance towards forgiveness of sin; I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it, etc., etc. It is the innocence of His character, the purity and sublimity of His moral precepts, the eloquence of His inculcation, the beauty of the apologues in which He conveys them, that I so much admire; sometimes, indeed, needing indulgence to eastern hyperbolism.” Jesus is innocent, a cynosure, an eloquent speaker, and a profluent apologue.

THE “APRIARIAN” SECT: RELIGION AND MORALITY

“Were I to be the founder of a new sect,” Jefferson writes to Thomas Parker (15 May 1819), “I would call them Apriarians⁴⁰ [*sic*], and, after the example of the bee, advise them to extract the honey of every sect.” We see plainly that it is not religion to which Jefferson objects, for every sect has its honey to be extracted, but organized, politicized religion—the more politicized, the greater his objections; the more democratic, the more tolerant his attitude.

39. Onuf sensibly claims that Unitarianism for Jefferson was religious reform in keeping with his republican sentiments. “From Jefferson’s perspective, Unitarianism did not represent an elite reaction to the evangelical surge, but rather the precocious fulfillment of its ultimate theological tendencies,” which were democratic reforms of church hierarchies. Peter Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 157–9, and also 151.

40. The word should be “apiarian,” from the Latin *apis* for “bee.”

Felling the Forests of America: The Futility of Religious Reform

"I should as soon think of writing for the reformation of Bedlam, as of the world of religious sects," writes Jefferson to Charles Clay (29 Jan. 1815). "Of these there must be, at least, ten thousand, every individual of every one of which believes all wrong but his own.⁴¹ To under take to bring them all right, would be like undertaking, single-handed, to fell the forests of America. . . . Government, as well as religion, has furnished its schisms, its persecutions, and its devices for fattening idleness on the earnings of the people. It has its hierarchy of emperors, kings, princes, and nobles, as that has of popes, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests. In short, cannibals are not to be found in the wilds of America only, but are reveling on the blood of every living people."

The quote illustrates two difficulties. First, religious reform is out of the question. It is a matter of arithmetic. Even if one of the thousands is correct, for that one to reform the thousands is a Brobdingnagian task. Second, the sects have their lardaceous political component. That political component fattens itself, through idleness, at expense of their worshippers.

It is the political dimension of the various religious sects—each competing with all others for power—that irks Jefferson. It is not acceptance of moral precepts of a particular religion, but hewing to the political precepts, pretending to be moral precepts. "A coalition of sentiments is not for the interest of the printers," Jefferson states to Elbridge Gerry (29 Mar. 1810). "They, like the clergy, live by the zeal they can kindle, and the schisms they can create. It is contest of opinion in politics as well as religion which makes us take great interest in them, and bestow our money liberally on those who furnish food to our appetite. 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 from a numerous priesthood, were they not to sophisticate 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, having no priests and thus no schisms, are a happy exception. "They judge of the text by the dictates of common sense and common morality."

The danger is in the political precepts, as they lay claim not merely to one's moral allegiance, but to one's soul. "The care of every man's soul belongs to himself," Jefferson writes to John Hancock (11 Oct. 1776). He may choose to nourish or preterm it. "God himself will not save men against

41. To Logan, he mentions the thousands of branches of Christianity. TJ to George Logan, 12 Nov. 1816.

their wills.” Moreover, once politicized, the precepts become inaccessible to laymen and become the exclusive province of priests. Nonetheless, as Jefferson illustrated through surgery on the New Testament, there are key moral precepts that form the germ of each religion. Jefferson writes to Thomas Leiper (21 Jan. 1809): “My religious reading has long been confined to the moral branch of religion, which is the same in all religions; while in that branch which consists of dogmas, all differ, all have a different set. The former instructs us how to live well and worthily in society; the latter are made to interest our minds in the support of the teachers who inculcate them. Hence, for one sermon on a moral subject, you hear ten on the dogmas of the sect. However, religion is not the subject for you and me; neither of us know the religious opinions of the other; that is a matter between our Maker and ourselves.”

A letter to James Fishback (27 Sept. 1809) brings home the point in plainest language. “Reading, reflection and time have convinced me that the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree (for all forbid us to steal, murder, plunder, or bear false witness), and that we should not intermeddle with the particular dogmas in which all religions differ, and which are totally unconnected with morality. In all of them we see good men, and as many in one as another.” Again, the claim is that any morally sensitive being is obliged to follow only those precepts common to all religions. Any morally sensitive being will also vilipend any precept that is not intuitively sensible. As Jefferson says famously in Query XVII of *Notes on Virginia*: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or not god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”⁴² Jefferson continues in his letter to Fishback: “The varieties in the structure and action of the human mind as in those of the body, are the work of our Creator, against which it cannot be a religious duty to erect the standard of uniformity. The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, he has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain. We all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus, and nowhere will they be found delivered in greater purity than in His discourses. It is, then, a matter of principle with me to avoid disturbing the tranquillity [*sic*] of others by the expression of any opinion on the innocent questions on which we schismatize.”⁴³

42. Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 285.

43. See also TJ to William Canby, 18 Sept. 1813; TJ to John Adams, 22 Aug. 1813; TJ to John Adams, 11 Jan. 1817; TJ to John Adams, 5 May 1817; and TJ to John Davis, 18 Jan. 1824.

One must be chary not to ascribe to Jefferson wholesale condemnation of each of the various religious sects. No religion, which produces “an honest life,” is to judged bad, Jefferson tells Miles King (26 Sept. 1814). In that regard, one is “to judge of the tree by its fruit.” Moreover, his letter to Gerry shows profound respect for the religion of the Quakers. He was also heartened by the non-dogmatic approaches of Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists.⁴⁴

UPSHOT

Jefferson’s reference to the ethics and religion of the Jews, the ancients, and Jesus in his “Syllabus” offers an obliging synopsis of his take on each. The moral code and depiction of God in the Old Testament, his curt and dismissive account shows, he deems not worth much and only the Jewish notion of monotheism ought to be salvaged. The emphasis of the ancient philosophers on virtue is meritable—he read considerable the ethical works of Cicero and the Stoics throughout his life and especially in his retirement—but virtue to them is self-serving, as it is for the sake of each person’s equanimity. The teachings of Jesus outstrip the views of the ancients in that other-concern actions are motivated by benevolence and a universal love of one’s fellow man and in that love of God is foundational. Thus, it is fair to state that Jefferson’s ethical and religious thinking was an amalgamation of ancient virtue ethics and teachings of Jesus. The amalgam with respect to ethics, it has been shown in several recent publications on Jefferson’s moral sense,⁴⁵ was no gallimaufry, but a consistent application of those two sources of early ethical thinking to the moral-sense thinking of his time. Jefferson concisely sums his take of the ethical and religious thinking of the Jews, the ancient philosophers, and Jesus in a letter to his dear friend John Adams (12 Oct. 1813), “The principle of the Hebrew was the fear, of the Gentile the honor, of the Christian the love of God.”⁴⁶

44. TJ to Levi Lincoln, 1 Jan. 1802, and TJ to Horatio Gates Spafford, 10 Jan. 1816.

45. Holowchak, *Dutiful Correspondent*, chap. 8; Holowchak, *Thomas Jefferson*, chap. 6; and “The March of Morality: Making Sense of Jefferson’s Moral Sense,” in *Thomas Jefferson and Philosophy: Essays on the Philosophical Cast of Jefferson’s Writings*, ed. M. Andrew Holowchak (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), chap. 8.

46. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Forum Philosophicum* for aidful comments on a prior draft of this paper.

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