

# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## PROBING EDUCATION

### Thomas Jefferson on Education

By Rev. Charles Brock  
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*Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features Thomas Jefferson, his education, and views of education.*

#### 14th in a Series

Engraved on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. are his words: *I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.* The context of this statement, often ignored by the churches, was in response to some Virginia clergy attempting to stifle the freedom of religion for others in the state and it helps to put Thomas Jefferson's views on war and religion in context. He was also strong on education and founded the University of Virginia. An amusing story (for us) is about the first students at the University of Virginia who were acting outrageously, so Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe were called to a college meeting. Jefferson stood up, paused, "and with the tenderness of a father ... burst into tears and sank back into his seat. The shock was electric."<sup>[1]</sup> The students repented, and the university was back in business. Perhaps this is an example for college presidents in the future?

In short, he was a dazzling figure for the beginning of the republic – full of bright ideas, loaded with contradictions, deeply concerned about America, though he managed to ride out the Revolution without taking part, according to

Washington and Hamilton, and was a lousy governor, but he set the stage for the future.

Doubtless his education and the theological atmosphere in the young United States affected his views. In his First Inaugural Address he claimed America was “a chosen country” and “the world’s best hope” ... “enlightened by a benign religion” and “acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence.” It is a surprise to some who know not the theology of the Founding Fathers that they acknowledged “that overruling Providence which governs the destinies of men and nations” and “watches over our country’s freedom and welfare.”<sup>[2]</sup> Max Lerner wrote: “He believed America was Providentially chosen to carry out this moral sense by breaking away from the depravity of Europe and restoring the original moral innocence of mankind.”<sup>[3]</sup> Michael Beran sees the connection between the Puritans and founders seeing America as a “chosen country ... [and] a second Israel.”<sup>[4]</sup> This was common in 17th and 18th century Puritan teaching in the American universities and was picked up by the seculars as well.

Jefferson was conflicted about doctrines of human nature. It is an old Enlightenment and religious issue. On the one hand there is a touch of Rousseau’s “noble savage” – if we are left within nature, we will turn out all right. He fostered a genuine idealism, almost utopian, about peoples’ possibilities. Let people be “natural” – love will follow and flourish. But he also said, “It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions; and experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind.”<sup>[5]</sup> Institutions could be tinged with evil as well. “Courts love the people always, as wolves do the sheep.”<sup>[6]</sup> Leonard Levy attempts to expose this darker side of Jefferson with his trashing of basic civil liberties and his self-righteousness that could run to ruthlessness. Levy and others claim he was an ideologue with no questioning mind at all.<sup>[7]</sup> That seems a bit extreme for most Jefferson scholars.

He had views on religion that many people today have a hard time recognizing. He followed a common William & Mary view held by the majority at the time. He wanted to widen the effect that religion had on national morality and claimed that “the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree.”<sup>[8]</sup> That content would include the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Golden Rule, as well as the search for justice that Jesus and the prophets attempted. Unlike all other presidents, Jefferson and Thomas Paine believed that Jesus was an insurrectionist.<sup>[9]</sup> (Alas, that flatters our 21st century rebels in America.) Jefferson and Benjamin Rush shared the conviction that the young republic needed religious or moral cohesion.

As quoted before, Rush told Jefferson during the campaign of 1800, “It is only necessary for Republicanism to ally itself to the Christian religion, to overturn

all the corrupted political and religious institutions in the world.”<sup>[10]</sup> Jefferson believed that substituting morals for mysteries would help the nation. Writing in 1801 to a former senator from Vermont, he said that the Christian religion when “brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent founder, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expansions of the human mind.”<sup>[11]</sup> It should be said that his religious philosophy was close to his political views especially when he emphasized individual autonomy in religion and the state as well as the constant questioning of both church and state. Also, he radically edited the Gospels to create an enlightened, republicanized form of American Christianity.

Though he did not order a Day of Repentance during his presidency as did Washington, John Adams, Madison, and Abraham Lincoln, he agreed with the Virginia House of Burgesses in resolving to observe a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer to show solidarity with Massachusetts Bay. This was enough to provoke Lord Dunmore, the royal governor, to dissolve the assembly.

Jefferson prepared focal lines for the 50th anniversary of the Declaration: “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 had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.”<sup>[12]</sup> Though Jefferson did not think that all governments had to be democracies, he thought the world in the future take would hold of republicanism. But if America were to be the prime example there had to be a defeat of the Yankee monarchists in the Federalist Party and the “reign of witches” in the Adams’ regime. Jefferson finally did win and the Virginia establishment with Madison and Monroe held sway until John Quincy Adams became the sixth president. But even John Quincy Adams was not unsympathetic to their cause.

But was it to be the great exemplar *of* a true democracy – or a crusader *for* democracy around the world? Most of the historians think of Jefferson as an exemplarist: “We are pointing out the way to struggling nations who wish, like us, to emerge from their tyrannies” which was the benefit of the Revolution, not the old British imperialism.<sup>[13]</sup> The exemplar motif is further found in a statement that makes eyes role in Europe then and now: “Old Europe will have to lean on our shoulders, and to hobble along by our side, under the monkish trammels of priests and kings, as she can. What a colossus shall we be when the southern continent comes up to our mark!”<sup>[14]</sup> (Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wasn’t the first to use the term “Old Europe” derogatorily.) Democracies were difficult to establish abroad, the wars of liberation in South America were bloody shambles, and African democracies collapsed one after another.

Summarizing John Locke, Jefferson wrote “our Savior chose not to propagate his religion by temporal punishments or civil incapacitation” but rather “he chose to ... extend it by its influence on reason, thereby showing to others how [they] should proceed.” It did not speak well of the power of God if God needed a human government to prop him up.<sup>[15]</sup> Jefferson implied that the risks to the U.S. were far too high to go around imposing democracies on ungrateful and dysfunctional countries.

But he also said that America might if necessary “shake a rod over the heads of all.”<sup>[16]</sup> And he wanted to add East and West Florida, Cuba, and Canada to the United States by force if necessary. He favored an invasion of Canada in 1776 and 1812 to liberate them from the British. They lost battles in 1776 on the Canadian borders. In 1812, the Americans were defeated at Toronto, Detroit, and Niagara. “On the issue of the nation’s proper role in the world, then, Jefferson’s legacy remains ultimately ambiguous. ... Among the statesmen of the early republic, he is more responsible than any for warning of the hazards that must attend the role of crusader. Yet he is also the statesman who is more responsible than any for evoking the perennial attractions of this role.”<sup>[17]</sup>

He had an abhorrence of war and said that “our constitution is a peace establishment – it is not calculated for war.” Christians go to war over trivia such as “my hair is not of the right cut; because I have not been dressed right; because I eat flesh on the road ... because I follow a guide crowned with a mitre and cloathed [sic] in white.” Nevertheless, the way he called on God to deliver America was not dissimilar to the Hebrew release. Though there were many things wrong with the teachings of Moses and Hebrew religion which could be “cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust ... [and] bloodthirsty and remorseless,”<sup>[18]</sup> he saw the exodus paradigm as important. But as said above – with the slaves and Native Americans, Jefferson and others were slow to apply the point of the exodus to them as well. And, dreadfully, Jefferson cut off relations with Haiti – the first state with a successful slave revolution.

As president, Jefferson successfully reversed the trends of the Federalists Washington, Hamilton, and Adams having a government of the “great and the good” to which the people were supposed to gratefully acquiesce. Jefferson made the government more accessible to the public and pushed hard for participatory and local democracy. But slaves and women didn’t count. When his Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin suggested naming women to certain posts, Jefferson said, “The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I.”<sup>[19]</sup> That was par for the course at the time. He was also inclined to support farmers over the northern industrialists. In words copied by Madison that were read to him by Jefferson: “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”<sup>[20]</sup>

John H. McElroy points to Jefferson's last letter written 10 days before his death in which he says that God gave men the same birthrights. "Kings, queens, princes, princesses, earls, countesses, marquesses, marchionesses, dukes, duchesses, viscounts, viscountesses, barons, baronets, and baronesses had not settled in their midst to constitute a governing class defined by birth."<sup>[21]</sup> In the same letter Jefferson speaks about the Declaration of Independence: "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 had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others."<sup>[22]</sup> This is aspirational and doesn't jibe with reality in Jefferson's time, but he had hopes.

There are also other actions that give one pause. His lust for Florida triumphed over his concern for principle and "reveals him at his worst."<sup>[23]</sup> His embargo on trade with England perturbed even his friends who begged him to reconsider but he seemed paralyzed by indecision and by the time he left office Congress was in a state of total confusion.<sup>[24]</sup> Earlier he was unperturbed by Shays' Rebellion, which threatened to bring down the government. He said: "I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere ... the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."<sup>[25]</sup> Timothy McVeigh blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing hundreds, with those same words emblazoned on his shirt. Gordon Woods is very critical of Jefferson on this: "He had little understanding of man's capacity for evil and had no tragic sense whatsoever."<sup>[26]</sup>

Most interesting was his general attitude to oppression, echoing much of how Moses and the prophets of Israel viewed the problems of their own society and as quoted above: "For I have sworn on the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."<sup>[27]</sup> It is interesting that this sentence was written in the context of his attack on the clergy for denying religious freedom.

Jefferson was always worried about religious oppression as stated in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He feared church establishment and said that it formed a "religious slavery." Uniformity brought no benefits, nor could it ever be activated anyway. "Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion." "Is uniformity attainable? Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of

coercion? To make one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth.”<sup>[28]</sup> We all should agree. That is not good exodizing.

### **Conclusion:**

There were many reactions to Jefferson then and now. Unitarian agriculturalists loved him – he wanted yeoman farmers with Deist views to run the country in all its parts. The 19th century non-establishment New Englanders were growing weary of the Congregational hegemony there, and Baptists and others used Jefferson’s words of “equality” to fight for their rights against the remnants of the Puritans. There were the evangelical religious and businesspeople who wanted their fair share of the American dream, but Jefferson would have been dismayed to see either or both in control. Bernard Bailyn notes that “The reputations of those who shape the fate of nations become historical forces in themselves. They are twisted and turned to fit the needs of those who follow, until, it seems, there is no actual person left, only a complex mirror in which successive interests see aspects of themselves. Of Jefferson this is double – trebly – true. His reputation has had what has been called a “kaleidoscopic changeability.”<sup>[29]</sup> He founded a university to challenge the dominance of the Ivy League and its outdated religious and social teachings.

But what a smartie he was! When President John F. Kennedy welcomed 49 Nobel Prize winners to the White House in 1962, he said, “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent and of human knowledge that has ever been gathered together at the White House – with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” He sopped up university Enlightenment and religious teaching of his time.

He had problems. Some say that he divides Americans in as many ways now as he did during his time. His impression can be described as “an ill-arranged cluster of meanings, rancorous, mercurial, fertile, the Jefferson image was constantly evolving.”<sup>[30]</sup> He was able to use Hamiltonian means to pursue Jeffersonian ends and “embraced ultimate power subtly but surely.”<sup>[31]</sup>

Certainly there were outcries about Jefferson’s slaves as Samuel Johnson said, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”<sup>[32]</sup> And there has been a spate of books and a film *Jefferson in Paris* about his relationship with Sally Hemings. And he did flog his slaves, hunted down fugitives as his fellow Virginia planters did, all the while saying that American slavery was not as bad as the ancient Roman version. He wanted all Black people after they might be freed to be sent back to Africa or anywhere else than America, but he talked endlessly of “rights.”

He pursued individual freedoms more than most and had he the chance he would have organized government into the smallest units possible, like the Congregationalists of New England. “God-given independence would benefit from keeping as many of the powers of government as possible in the hands of men who were able to assemble regularly in their own neighborhoods to govern themselves.”<sup>[33]</sup> He wanted a minimum of interference from governments.

He asked that the words on his gravestone would be as follows, no more and no less, and it shows clearly what he thought was important:

***Here was buried  
Thomas Jefferson  
Author of the Declaration of American Independence  
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom  
& Father of the University of Virginia.***

If we take his epitaph as his last testimony to his own life we find his summation of his work, and might we ask – is it significant that he left out the presidency and the introduction of olive trees to America?

It is interesting that Jefferson puts the Declaration first on his tombstone. According to Joseph Ellis that was appropriate. “The entire history of liberal reform in the United States can be written as a process of discovery, within Jefferson’s words of a mandate for ending slavery, providing the rights of citizenship to African Americans, women, and gay people and protesting a full range of individual freedom. ... One can trace Jefferson in the demand for women’s rights at Seneca Falls, Lincoln’s condemnation of slavery in the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’ speech. What has come to be called the American Dream, then, is the Jeffersonian dream writ large, a utopian vision of the ideal society that can never be fully achieved but the goal that each generation aspires to approximate and more closely approach.”<sup>[34]</sup>

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the second and third presidents and old foes and old comrades both, died exactly 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1826. It appears that they steeled themselves up to last to that day as one could in those days before the advent of life-support machines. Jefferson’s last words on July 3, St. Thomas Day (“Doubting Thomas” – old calendar) were “Is it the Fourth?” He was correct. It was reported that Adams’ last words were “Jefferson lives.” And he was right too. He lives in the hearts and minds of millions of Americans.

[1] Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison A Biography*, 1971 p 656

[2] JEFFERSON to Thomas Law *op cit* p 93

[3] Lerner, Max; *Thomas Jefferson – America’s Philosopher-King*; 1997 p 108

[4] Beran, Michael Knox; *Jefferson’s Demons*; 2003; p 153

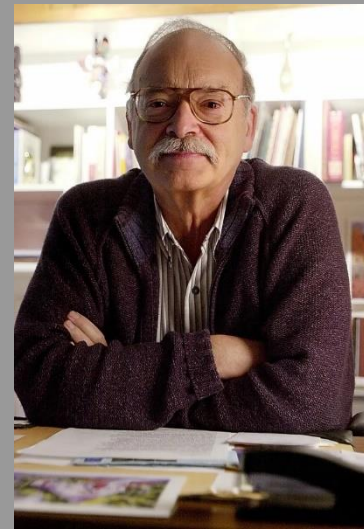
[5] PJEFFERSON XI 49

- [6] Meacham, op cit p 253
- [7] cf Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*, 1963, Ivan R. Dee
- [8] JEFFERSON to James Fishback, 1809
- [9] JEFFERSON wrote Jesus was “punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law.” Jesus was killed because of the problems he posed for both the Romans and that part of the Jewish religious establishment that favored Roman occupation. Thomas Paine agreed that not only did Jesus preach the equality of mankind; he also was an insurrectionist against slave-holding Rome.
- [10] To Thomas Jefferson from Benjamin Rush, 22 August 1800; [founders.archives.gov](http://founders.archives.gov)
- [11] Many said Jefferson wanted a “wall of separation between church and state” taken from his letter to the Danbury Conn. Baptists. But he never wanted a separation between religion and politics. Cf Jon Meacham *American Gospel*, Random House, 2006, p 19
- [12] Quoted Fornieri, op cit p 29
- [13] Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 2006, p 43
- [14] [/www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/dreams-future-quotation/](http://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/dreams-future-quotation/)
- [15] Meacham op cit p 123
- [16] JEFFERSON to Thomas Leiper, June 12, 1815. See also Tucker Hendrickson *Empire of Liberty* Chapter 26. Shaking a rod over the head may have come for 18<sup>th</sup> century church practice. When men fell asleep in services, the verger would shake a rod over their heads sometimes with force applied. The other end of the rod had a feather to be used on drowsy ladies. I suspect Jefferson had more violent biblical means in mind.
- [17] Tucker and Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty, The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson*, op cit, OUP, p 256
- [18] Quotes from JEFFERSON to John Adams April 11, 1823
- [19] Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson*, 2003, Times Books, p 39
- [20] copied by Madison in Query 19 of *Notes on the State of Virginia* 1781-2; PJM 8:415-6
- [21] John Harmon McElroy, *American Beliefs*, Chicago 1999, p 144
- [22] *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed by Adrienne Koch and William Peden, Modern Library, 1998, p 666
- [23] Herring op cit p 110
- [24] Herring op cit p 121
- [25] Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 22 February 1787
- [26] from Gordon Wood *Legacy*, op cit p 409 & 413
- [27] JEFFERSON to Benjamin Rush Sept 23, 1800
- [28] JEFFERSON, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVII
- [29] Bailyn, Bernard, *To Begin the World Anew*, 2003, Vintage, p 37
- [30] Merrill D Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*; 1960, University of Virginia Press, p 443
- [31] Meacham, op cit p 352
- [32] Samuel Johnson in Donald L Greene ed *Samuel Johnson's Political Writings*, 1977, p 454
- [33] Edmund S Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence – Adams, Jefferson, Washington* Norton, 1976, p 77
- [34] Joseph J Ellis, *The Cause – the American Revolution and its Discontents, 1773-1783*, WW Norton, 2021, p 89
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rev. Charles Brock**, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.



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