

Jefferson's view of religion

Directions to the teacher: The following passages attempt to summarize the complex and controversial views of Thomas Jefferson on the subject of religion. This is a basic overview intended to spark discussion and will not answer all questions your students may have on this subject. Note to teacher, download and use as you need it.

The underlined words are probably not familiar to your students and probably need to be discussed.

Few subjects have elicited more controversy than Thomas Jefferson's view of religion. Atheists and Christians want to claim his views for themselves, thereby adopting him into their religion or belief systems. Jefferson approached religion like many other subjects during his day, from a starting-point of skepticism and an empirical view characteristic of Enlightenment thinkers. What emerges from Jefferson in the subject of religion is not a rejection of a deity, but affirmation of a creator, rejection of what he saw as needless mystifications, and a good set of morals to live by.

Throughout his national political career, Jefferson fought the charge of being an atheist, a form of belief on religious questions that powerfully influenced some key Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume. Atheism is based on the idea that the universe exists without having been created by a Creator. To Jefferson's logical mind, this belief was illogical. He accepted a deist view, which recognized the existence of a divine creator of the world. As Jefferson wrote to his friend John Adams in April 1816, he believed in "A first cause possessing intelligence and power; power in the production, and intelligence in the design and constant preservation of the system."¹ Jefferson's view has recognizable parallels to the concept of "intelligent design" endorsed by many modern evangelical Christians.² From this quote by Jefferson, the reader can see that Jefferson believed in a God who created and sustained his creation. He did not believe everything in the Bible, however, he counseled his nephew Peter Carr to read the Bible critically, "Read the bible then, as you would read Livy and Tacitus, the facts which are within the ordinary course of nature you will believe on the authority of the

¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816, "Hope in the Head, Fear Astern." 1382-1383

² However, one major difference between evangelicals today and Jefferson is the role in their belief system of Jesus as a personal savior which he did not accept.

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writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus."³ Of Jesus' teaching he wrote, "his system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has ever been taught, and consequently more that those of any of the ancient philosophers."⁴ Some modern religious thinkers have assumed that he sought to create his own bible, a claim from which he would have recoiled in disgust. In keeping with his views as to the need to recover the pure history and teachings of Jesus, however, he did take a New Testament and cut away the miracles and what he felt were the corruptions of Christianity, with the purpose of distilling Jesus' life and teachings in their purest form. He compared all the gospels and created a booklet for his own use presenting the sublime and virtuous truths that Jesus of Nazareth taught. This compilation, which he called "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," is what is often misnamed "The Jefferson Bible."

The most important element of Jefferson's views on religion was that a person's spiritual belief and practices are a private matter between him or her and God. Writing to a Connecticut group of Baptists in 1802, President Jefferson observed that he "[b]eliev[ed] with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship..."⁵ Like many other founders, including George Washington and James Madison, Jefferson believed that religious practices or belief should never be an activity regulated by the government. This idea is again expressed in a letter to John Adams. Writing to his good friend after the presidency he expressed these very personal views, "Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my god and myself alone."⁶

³ Homage of Reason to Peter Carr, Paris August 10, 1787. In other writings Jefferson believed that the stories in the Bible with their miracles and the idea of the virgin birth were corruptions of the pure form of Christianity, but "not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself.

⁴ Letter to Joseph Priestly April 9, 1803.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut, January 1, 1802.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 January 1817, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2 volumes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 2: 506.