1993

"The euthanasia of platonic christianity" : Thomas Jefferson, Plato, religion and human freedom

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**The euthanasia of Platonic Christianity: Thomas Jefferson,
Plato, religion and human freedom**

Knittel, Gregory Lawrence, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1993

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"THE EUTHANASIA OF PLATONIC CHRISTIANITY":
THOMAS JEFFERSON, PLATO, RELIGION
AND HUMAN FREEDOM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Gregory Lawrence Knittel
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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Dr. Joan Todd

Dr. John Wintterle

Dr. John Bernhardt

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

"THE EUTHANASIA OF PLATONIC CHRISTIANITY": THOMAS JEFFERSON, PLATO, RELIGION AND HUMAN FREEDOM

By Greg Knittel

In Thomas Jefferson's view, the Christian clergy had far too long held humanity within the domain of superstition, with political power and threats of eternal punishment to those who failed to understand the mysteries of the Trinity. Influenced by Dr. Joseph Priestley, Jefferson argued that orthodox Christianity resembled the teachings of Plato and Neo-Platonism rather than the teachings of Jesus.

In his public and private life, Jefferson consistently remained opposed to any form of tyranny over the freedom of the human mind. In an effort to separate Platonic philosophy from Christian doctrine, Jefferson insisted that the University of Virginia refrain from teaching theology. Plato was to be studied in the university as an author of classical rhetoric, not as a model for theological arguments on the nature of God. The primary purpose of this study is to examine Jefferson's reaction to Plato and Neo-Platonism, and how this reaction contributed to the writing of the Bill for Religious Freedom and the establishing of the University of Virginia.

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At De Anza College, I would like to express my gratitude to Professors Patrick Bresnan and Ken Bruce. I cannot think of a better setting in which to work than De

Anza College, and I am particularly fortunate to be able to work with such an excellent and supportive staff. Patrick Bresnan and Ken Bruce have both helped me grow as a working historian and I will always remain grateful for their friendship and support. A special note of thanks to Pam Warren for her many hours of typing and retyping this thesis.

My deepest appreciation goes to my family, my wife Marcie and our children, Amoreena and Mike, for their acceptance and understanding of the times I have been unable to give them my full attention. I would also like to thank my parents, James and Beverly Knittel, who have always been there for us.

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY

OF BEVERLY KNITTEL

1933 - 1991

FOR GIVING ME THE GREATEST GIFT

I HAVE EVER KNOWN:

THE LOVE OF READING

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM,
SOURCES AND METHOD

Scholars have long acknowledged Thomas Jefferson's aversion to the metaphysical doctrines of Plato. This facet of Jefferson's thought has often been taken for granted; however, there has been no thorough examination of his specific reactions to Platonic ideas and how he saw them affecting Christianity. None of Jefferson's biographers has written a study in which Jefferson's rejection of Plato is fully considered. It is of some value to correct this omission, since Jefferson utilized his convictions on these subjects as a basis for some of his strongest public actions.

The most comprehensive of Jefferson's biographers, Dumas Malone, pointed out that Jefferson rejected Plato as a Greek mystic, but Malone did not thoroughly examine Jefferson's reading of Plato.¹ Merrill D. Peterson edited a volume of Jefferson's writings and he noted Jefferson's disdain for Plato in his biography of Jefferson, but Peterson did not trace the discussions on Plato that Jefferson conducted through his correspondence.² In his Passionate Pilgrim, Alf J. Mapp observed that Jefferson considered himself a Christian, but not a "Platonist."³

Mapp did not analyze what Jefferson meant when he spoke in such terms, but he did point out that Jefferson had a copy of Plato in the White House.⁴ Mapp also noted the importance of Jefferson's study of the thought of Dr. Joseph Priestley, but he does not thoroughly examine Priestley's influence on Jefferson. While all of Jefferson's biographers discuss the importance of Priestley, the emphasis of their work has not included the full evidence which demonstrates Priestley's views on Plato and their relation to Jefferson's views.

The importance of Jefferson's classical education receives primary consideration in Marie Kimball's biography, Jefferson The Road to Glory 1743 to 1776. Kimball pointed out that even in retirement, Jefferson discussed "the doctrines of Epicurus, Epictetus, Plato, and Socrates as though they were burning questions of the moment."⁵ While Kimball discusses Jefferson's literary interests, she does not explore Jefferson's views on Plato in particular. Other scholars have written about Jefferson's interest in ancient authors, but no work has been singly devoted to Jefferson's reading of Plato. The main approach that scholars have chosen is to provide a broad survey of Jefferson's reading interests. In Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist, Karl Lehmann observed Jefferson's vehement emotional reaction to Plato, and in this, Lehmann uses more emphatic language than Jefferson himself. Lehmann argued that Jefferson had an

"outright hatred of Plato."⁶ Lehmann briefly discusses Jefferson's argument that the doctrines of Plato had corrupted Christianity; however, even though Lehmann goes on to mention the influence of Joseph Priestley, he ends his discussion on Jefferson and Plato without a full inquiry into Jefferson's views as revealed through his correspondence.⁷ Lehmann concludes that "Jefferson exaggerated the actual historical influence of Platonism on Christianity, however strong it was."⁸

Jefferson's own religious thinking is an important element which helped to shape his views regarding Plato and the Christian system. In The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson, Charles Sanford notes Jefferson's reaction to Plato as well as the important role that Priestley played in Jefferson's religious thought.⁹ However, the connection between Plato and Christianity is not the emphasis of Sanford's work, and Sanford does not examine all of Jefferson's correspondence concerning Plato.

The tension that existed between the rational mind and religion during the eighteenth century is developed by Peter Gay in The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism. Gay describes the tensions as he traces Christian mysticism and orthodox Christianity back to the philosophy of Plato.¹⁰ However, Gay does not specifically examine Jefferson's reactions to Plato. Daniel Boorstin's study of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century in The Lost

World of Thomas Jefferson also includes interesting insights upon the conflicts between the rational thinkers and religion. In a chapter entitled "Jeffersonian Christianity," Boorstin included observations on the work of Priestley and Jefferson's aversion to the mystical ideas of Plato.¹¹ Boorstin did not fully examine Jefferson's views on the subject, and he did not trace them through Jefferson's correspondence in an effort to demonstrate how Jefferson's views on metaphysical speculative philosophy influenced his practical interests, such as the establishing of a University.

Carl Becker's description of the eighteenth century Enlightenment is still worthy of attention. In The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers, Becker provides an interesting characterization of the paradoxes which existed between religion and reason. Becker argued that the philosophers "defended toleration valiantly, but could with difficulty tolerate priests. They denied that miracles ever happened, but believed in the perfectibility of the human race."¹² While Becker's book is an interesting mixture of irony, humor and insight, he does not consider Jefferson's reading of Plato in particular.

Often missing from discussions of Jefferson and Plato is the later dimensions of Platonism. Jefferson himself owned a volume of Plotinus, Neo-Platonism's major spokesman.¹³ Recent scholarship on Plotinus tends to

emphasize the very elements with which Jefferson took exception. The transference of Plato's philosophy into the realm of Christian theology through the teachings of Neo-Platonists is discussed in Werner Jaeger's Early Christianity and Greek Paideia.¹⁴ The evolution of Christian theology through the use of Platonic philosophy is considered in NeoPlatonism and Christian Thought, edited by Dominic J. O'Meara.¹⁵ The use which Christians were able to make of pagan traditions and pagan philosophy is considered in Robin Lane Fox's Pagans and Christians.¹⁶ Of particular interest are Fox's chapters entitled "Seeing the Gods" and "Language of the Gods." Fox pointed out that a Christian could very well ask a pagan, "If you believe in your gods' miracles through man-made statues, . . . why do you not believe in God's resurrection of the body?"¹⁷ In The Christian Tradition, Jaroslav Pelikan pointed out that Christian theologians were in some respects ". . . dependent upon Plato for their terminology." Pelikan further argued that "Plato, while not authentically trinitarian in his doctrine of God, had taught that the Logos was the Creator of the world; some of his disciples had come even closer to Christian orthodoxy, notably Plotinus, . . ."¹⁸ The Neo-Platonic doctrine that essence comes into perfect being through the divine idea is considered in Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method. Gadamer argued, however, that

. . . historical reality is not merely a heavy, opaque medium, mindless matter, rigid necessity against which the spirit beats in vain and in whose bonds it suffocates. This kind of gnostic, Neoplatonic view of historical events as emergence into the external world of appearance does not do justice to the . . . value of history. . . . The unfolding of human life in time has its own productivity.¹⁹

Just as Gadamer noted the stifling influence of vague mystical thought upon history, Jefferson observed the transformation of Christianity through Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines. Jefferson was not a theologian, nor did he have any particular use for theologians. He dedicated his life to the cause for human freedom and this included a lifelong struggle against the intolerance of the Christian clergy, who, in Jefferson's view (and to borrow a phrase from Gadamer as quoted above), had imposed "rigid necessity against which the spirit beats in vain and in whose bonds it suffocates."

Jefferson's reading interests are given special consideration in Charles Sanford's Thomas Jefferson and His Library. Sanford pointed out that even though Jefferson owned several copies of Plato, he was not particularly fond of Plato.²⁰ Sanford also discusses Jefferson's reading of Priestley.²¹ However, Sanford's main emphasis is on surveying Jefferson's religious reading, not Jefferson's reading of Plato in particular. An invaluable source for researching Jefferson's vast literary interests is

Millicent E. Sowerby's five-volume Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson.

The development of Jefferson's religious views as an Enlightenment thinker are perhaps best seen in the collection of primary source material edited by Dickinson W. Adams, Jefferson's Extracts From the Gospels: The Philosophy of Jesus and the Life and Morals of Jesus. In addition to providing Jefferson's own personal version of the Bible, Adams also included over one hundred pages of Jefferson's correspondence on religious issues, including some of Jefferson's views on Plato's influence on the Christian system. Other crucial collections of Jefferson's correspondence and public papers are The Works of Thomas Jefferson in twelve volumes, edited by Paul Leicester Ford. The Writings of Thomas Jefferson in twenty volumes, edited by Albert Ellery Berg, are well-indexed. The Princeton publication, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, is generally acknowledged as the most authoritative and complete; however, these papers only extend to May, 1793, so that the work by Ford, Berg and Adams was more useful in researching Jefferson's later correspondence on Plato. For the correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams in particular, The Adams-Jefferson Letters, edited by Lester J. Cappon, was essential.

There have been several doctoral dissertations that have touched upon Jefferson's views of Plato's influence on

the Christian system, but none has considered Jefferson's reading of Plato as a central thesis. In his dissertation Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy and Theology: As Related to His Political Principles, Including Separation of Church and State, James Gurley noted Jefferson's rejection of Plato as a source of corruption in Christianity, and he also briefly discusses Priestley's influence on Jefferson.²² However, Gurley does not fully examine Priestley's work, nor does he analyze all of Jefferson's correspondence pertaining to Plato. Constance B. Schultz also observed Jefferson's aversion to Plato in her dissertation The Radical Religious Ideas of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams: A Comparison, but Schultz does not fully discuss the text of Priestley's work and she does not concentrate on Jefferson's reading of Plato in particular.²³ Henry Close Montgomery's dissertation Thomas Jefferson and the Classical Tradition demonstrates the importance of the ancient authors in Jefferson's early education and Montgomery included several extended quotes from Jefferson's letters that illustrate Jefferson's rejection of Plato, but Montgomery did not fully examine Jefferson's reasons for rejecting Plato.²⁴

The organization of this study has three parts. The first part deals with the eighteenth century and Jefferson's religious background, as well as his educational development. The Commonplace book that Jefferson kept throughout his youth and early adulthood was a primary

source for investigating Jefferson's reading of the ancient authors and contemporary philosophers. The second part of this study relies upon the pristine letters of correspondence in which Jefferson developed his mature views of religion and philosophy through on-going discussions with many of his friends. The importance of personal letters is a primary consideration because they reveal Jefferson on an intimate level. Richard Beale Davis observed that "Every facet of his [Jefferson's] comprehensive mind, including the religious convictions he said should not be enquired into by anyone, he revealed to one or more of his hundreds of correspondents."²⁵ The importance that Jefferson gave to his own correspondence can be seen in the fact that he was "the only one of his generation to systematize his correspondence."²⁶

The first letters to be considered are those between Jefferson and John Adams, a sustained correspondence that lasted more than thirteen years and in which discussions of religion and Plato are central. The second section includes the correspondence between Jefferson and Joseph Priestley, as well as Jefferson's exchange of letters with Benjamin Rush, both men of science who shared Jefferson's interest in analytical studies. Section two also considers some of Priestley's key theological writings, which had a deep influence on Jefferson. The third section concerns Jefferson's correspondence with a variety of friends,

relatives and acquaintances, specifically on religious and spiritual concerns and their social implications. Jefferson wrote to his nephew, Peter Carr, and to the former secretary for the Continental Congress, Charles Thomson. Jefferson also corresponded with his friend, the Washington socialite, Margaret Bayard Smith. Other letters considered were those sent to a former senator, George Logan, who had written Jefferson about the possibility of Jefferson publishing a book on Christianity. Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, a mutual friend of Jefferson and John Adams, also corresponded with Jefferson on religious issues. Jefferson was the occasional recipient of unsolicited religious writings. He wrote to a friend of his, Salma Hale, who had sent him some religious pamphlets. Jefferson also wrote to a Unitarian minister, Jared Sparks, a Presbyterian minister, Ezra Stiles Ely, a long-time friend, William Short, and a retired physics professor from Harvard, Benjamin Waterhouse.

The final section of this study concludes with the examination of two crucial practical applications of Jefferson's philosophical convictions, the Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom and the establishment of the University of Virginia. Jefferson's public life was often the fulfillment of his personal beliefs. He had argued that an individual's religion should be judged by how they conduct their lives. The Bill for Religious Freedom and the establishment of the University of Virginia were two of Jefferson's proudest

accomplishments. In his Bill for Religious Freedom and the establishment of the University, Jefferson can be seen attempting to correct what he considered to be the abuses which had occurred through the corruption of the Christian tradition due to the misuse of Plato's philosophy.

NOTES

¹Dumas Malone, Jefferson and His Time: The Sage of Monticello (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), 194-197.

²Merrill D. Peterson, Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 51-52.

³Alf J. Mapp, Thomas Jefferson Passionate Pilgrim (New York: Madison Books, 1991), 264.

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Marie Kimball, Jefferson The Road to Glory 1743 to 1776 (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1943), 110.

⁶Karl Lehmann, Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 84.

⁷Ibid., 83-86.

⁸Ibid., 84.

⁹Charles B. Sanford, The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1984), 88-89.

¹⁰Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 207-419.

¹¹Daniel J. Boorstin, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 151-166.

¹²Carl L. Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 31.

¹³Millicent E. Sowerby, Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1951-59), 2:18. Jefferson's copy of Plotinus was a first edition printing, dated 1580. This edition of Plotinus was a Latin translation which also included the Greek.

¹⁴Werner Jaeger discusses how Christian theologians such as Origen (ca. 185 to 254 AD) naturally used their background in Greek philosophy to explain the Gospels in their writing. Jaeger pointed out that "though he [Origen] lived the life of a Christian, he held Hellenic views about all things, including God. . . . For he lived with Plato constantly and read the entire literature of the Platonists and Pythagoreans of the preceding generation." Werner Jaeger, Early Christianity and Greek Paideia (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard Press, 1961), 50. Jaeger also noted that "Plato's ideas . . . were now interpreted as the thoughts of God, in order to give Platonic theology a more concrete form. Clement and Origen grew up under this cultural system." Ibid., 45. Jaeger further argued that it was "Plato who made the world of the soul visible for the first time to the inner eye of man, and they [early Christian theologians such as Origen] realized how radically that discovery had changed human life. So, on their way upward, Plato became the guide who turned their eyes from material and sensual reality to the immaterial world in which the noble-minded of the human race were to make their home." Ibid., 46.

¹⁵Dominic J. O'Meara observed that "Ever since Christians began to reflect on their faith, to express and explain it both to themselves and to others, they have availed themselves of the intellectual means which appeared to be suitable for this and which had been developed by the philosophical movements of their time. . . . The intellectual system that many influential early Christian thinkers made most use of was Platonic philosophy in the eclectic (Aristotelianizing and Stoicizing) form in which this philosophy was understood and widely taught in the early centuries of the Christian era and in particular in the coherent and inspiring structure given this eclectic Platonism by Plotinus (ca. A.D. 412-485), . . ." Dominic J. O'Meara, ed., Neoplatonism and Christian Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), ix.

¹⁶Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989), 103-261.

¹⁷Ibid., 136.

¹⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:251. Jefferson was aware of Augustine's appreciation of Plato, and Pelikan confirms the importance of Plato's philosophy to St. Augustine by arguing that "Augustine, like Cicero before him, had lauded Plato above all other philosophers. Among

the theologians of Greek Christianity, "his theology was so pleasing to our fathers and teachers that they were not ashamed in their writings about God to make use not only of his ideas, but even of the very words of Plato." Ibid. More than merely providing a metaphysical philosophy which the early Christian theologians could utilize in discussions of the nature of God, Plato had provided the essential language with which a theological debate could occur. Pelikan noted that the early Christian theologians became ". . . dependent upon Plato for their terminology. Plato, while not authentically trinitarian in his doctrine of God, had taught that the Logos was the Creator of the World; some of his disciples had come even closer to Christian orthodoxy, notably Plotinus, . . ." Ibid.

¹⁹Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Corporation, 1991), 202. Gadamer further discusses the Neoplatonic theological model which illustrates the metaphysical explanation as to how the Logos, or the "Word" of God, was understood to become flesh in the body of Christ. Essentially it is a problem of process, that is, how can the expression of thought ever contain the totality of everything in the mind? Similarly, how can the incomprehensible mind of God be contained in the "Word" made flesh in the person of Christ? Jefferson understood this mystery, this paradox, but he argued that the only way to properly understand this paradox was to realize that the meaning of the "Word" - is reason, and to comprehend this process of reason as an ongoing living thing rather than as the final completion of the act of divine emanation. In an interesting observation, Gadamer pointed out how the Neoplatonic idea of something coming into perfect being from the source of its ideal form was utilized in Christian thought. Gadamer observed that, "The idea of emanation in Neoplatonism implies more than the physical movement of flowing out. The primary image, rather is that of a fountain. In the process of emanation, that from which something flows, the One, is not deprived or depleted. The same is true of the birth of the Son from the Father, who does not use up anything of himself but takes something to himself. And this is likewise true of the mental emergence that takes place in the process of thought, speaking to oneself. This kind of production is at the same time a total remaining within oneself. If it can be said of the divine relationship between word and intellect that the word originates not partially but wholly (totaliter) in the intellect, then it is true also that one word originates totaliter from another - i.e., has its origin in the mind--like the deduction of a conclusion from the premisses. . . . The word is not formed only after the act of knowledge has been completed . . . it is the act of knowledge itself.

Thus the word is simultaneous with this forming (formatio) of the intellect. . . . Thus we see how the creation of the world came to be viewed as a true image of the Trinity." Ibid., 423-24.

²⁰Charles B. Sanford, Thomas Jefferson and His Library (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), 125.

²¹Ibid., 134.

²²James Lafayette Gurley, Thomas Jefferson's Philosophy and Theology: As Related to His Political Principals, Including Separation of Church and State (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975), 62-67.

²³Constance B. Schultz, The Radical Religious Ideas of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams: A Comparison (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1973), 218.

²⁴Henry Close Montgomery, Thomas Jefferson and the Classical Tradition (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1945), 12-14.

²⁵Richard Beale Davis, Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia 1790-1830 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 291.

²⁶Ibid.

"Criticize the writing of any book
whatsoever, committing the criticism to
writing."

Thomas Jefferson, 1765

JEFFERSON'S EARLY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND,
EARLY EDUCATION IN THE CLASSICS AND
THE DISCOVERY OF PLATO

Thomas Jefferson was born into a century filled with religious tension. On every side, the forces of rationalism were involved in a struggle with organized religion for the mind of Europe; a struggle that reached out to embrace England's colonies on the far side of the Atlantic. Historians have referred to the eighteenth century generally as an era when faith was opposed to reason. Jefferson did not oppose faith, or even belief systems, but he did insist that religious thought be subject to historical examination in order to determine the underlying causes for the evolution of the Christian doctrine. The idea that the doctrines of Christianity had evolved through the ages Jefferson found suspect, because he viewed orthodox Christianity as being a manipulation of the simple moral message of love that Jesus taught before his death. Jefferson's religious upbringing and educational background merged with his mature reading and reflection and resulted

in a major insight into the cause for the manipulation of the Christian message: Platonic philosophy had insinuated itself into Christianity with the result that the life and study of Jesus was constricted by a superimposed theology which stressed an intolerant mystical inflexibility upon the human mind.

Many of the tensions which existed between the rational minds of the Enlightenment and religion have been examined by Peter Gay in his work on the Enlightenment. In observing these tensions, Gay argued that many of the eighteenth century philosophes criticized Christianity because "it [Christianity] hammered out its doctrine, its discipline and organization, amidst undignified wranglings, [with] inane debates in endless assemblies, angry conflicts over trivial matters, mutual slander and persecution."¹ Jefferson questioned the validity of a Christian doctrine that was, in effect, developed by a committee of theologians instead of being based solely on the actual words of Jesus. Jefferson argued, "The truth is that the greatest enemies to the doctrines of Jesus are those calling themselves the expositors of them, who have perverted them for the structure of a system of fancy absolutely incomprehensible, and without any foundation in his genuine words."²

Jefferson's criticism of the Christian doctrine was characteristic of the Enlightenment in that he insisted that religion should be free from the mystical elements of

belief which were better suited for mythology. Jefferson argued:

. . . the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter. But we may hope that the dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States will do away with all this artificial scaffolding, and restore to us the primitive and genuine doctrines of this the most venerated reformer of human errors.³

The rational mind of the Enlightenment was indeed rather skeptical of the elements of faith which comprised the Christian doctrine. Peter Gay characterized the eighteenth century attitudes:

Christianity claimed to bring light, hope, and truth, but its central myth was incredible, its dogma a conflation of rustic superstitions, its sacred book an incoherent collection of primitive tales, its church a cohort of servile fanatics as long as they were out of power and of despotic fanatics once they had seized control.⁴

While such a view may summarize generally some of the opposition of the Enlightenment thinkers' to Christianity, Jefferson specifically was concerned about despotism of the clergy. In order to undermine the despotic power of the clergy, Jefferson traced the source of the clergy's theological arguments back to the writings of Plato so as to demonstrate rationally that their theological ideas resembled Plato's metaphysics much more than the teachings of Jesus. Jefferson argued that "Plato's visions have furnished a basis for endless systems of theology, and he is therefore all but adopted as a Christian saint."⁵

While the men of the Enlightenment embraced the writers of antiquity, so too did the theologians of the Christian church. Rational thinkers in the eighteenth century, viewing Christian theologians pillaging the writings of antiquity in their efforts to bolster their absurd theology, were driven to defend the integrity of ancient authors with an almost possessive passion. Gay pointed out that the early church fathers "had been influenced by Platonism; some of them had even exploited the classics for their own uses; they had claimed Vergil's Fourth Eclogue as a prediction of Christ's coming and claimed Seneca himself for Christianity."⁶ Gay went on to observe that early church fathers such as St. Augustine and St. Jerome could not do without pagan literature, nor could they "refrain from tampering with it."⁷ Gay argued further that St. Augustine in particular "had come to Christianity through pagan speculation, and he never quite surrendered his affection for Plato or for Pagan literature in general."⁸

While Christian theologians found Plato's philosophy useful in supporting their doctrines, Jefferson demanded an historical religion that made sense in terms of universal human understanding. Jefferson's intellectual development led him towards a humane belief system and away from what he would consider the incomprehensible mystical ideas of Platonic religion.

Even though Jefferson's mature religious views were representative of his time, few records indicate what sort of early religious training he actually had. Jefferson had been baptized into the Anglican church; however, such information reveals very little, for the same thing could be said of almost every child born into the Virginia gentry.⁹ Jefferson was a member of the Charlottesville Episcopal church, and according to Henry Randall, one of Jefferson's earliest biographers, Jefferson regularly attended church services.¹⁰ Jefferson contributed to Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Baptist churches.¹¹ In none of his early writings, or in his Autobiography written in 1821, however, does Jefferson discuss church services he attended or sermons that he heard.

Jefferson's educational background is easier to document because he discussed his early education in his Autobiography. Jefferson received an education that was typical for planters' sons in eighteenth century Virginia. The planters, for whom education was the mark of a gentleman, were intent that their sons had a thorough introduction, and hopefully understanding, of the ancient authors. The ability to read Latin and Greek was essential; thus, private tutors were hired to teach languages, as well as a wide variety of subjects necessary to prepare a student for the College of William and Mary. Classical authors had an important influence upon the Virginia planters in their

educational demands for their sons. Their [the Virginia gentry] "virtues owed perhaps as much to Aristotle and Horace as to Christianity."¹²

For Thomas Jefferson, the process of acquiring language skills began when his father, Peter Jefferson, placed him in an English school at the age of five.¹³ Jefferson recalled in his Autobiography that his father next placed him in the Latin school of the Reverend Mr. Douglas. Later, Jefferson described Douglas as a "superficial Latinist, less instructed in Greek."¹⁴ Jefferson lived as a boarder in the home of Mr. Douglas, who also served as the minister for St. James Parish in Northam.¹⁵

In 1757, Peter Jefferson died, and his dying wish "was that his son receive a thorough classical education."¹⁶ Jefferson's education was paid for through his father's estate.¹⁷ He inherited forty books from his father, a cherry tree desk, instruments for surveying, and a bookcase.¹⁸ Among the books that Jefferson inherited were volumes on English history; some books by Addison, a prayer book, a Bible, some maps, and works on astronomy and geography. However, there were no books by Plato, or by any other ancient authors.¹⁹

After his father's death, Jefferson was sent to study with another minister, the Reverend Mr. Maury. Jefferson described Maury in his Autobiography as "a correct classical scholar."²⁰ Jefferson certainly seemed to have

higher regard for Mr. Maury than he did for Mr. Douglas. In addition to being a real classical scholar, it is likely that Mr. Maury required Jefferson to keep a record of his readings in a commonplace book. Maury's ideas on the proper method of study can be seen in a letter that he wrote to his son:

I would recommend it to you to reflect, and remark on, and digest what you read; to enter into the spirit and design of your author; to observe every step he takes to accomplish his end; and to dwell on any remarkable beauties of diction, justness or sublimity of sentiment, or masterly strokes of true wit which may occur in the course of your reading.²¹

Such advice appears to have been passed on to Jefferson while he was with Mr. Maury.²²

In 1760, Jefferson enrolled in the College of William and Mary which was under the direct authority of the Anglican church. The College of William and Mary was established in order to train ministers for the Anglican church in Virginia. In addition to this, the college was intent upon spreading the Christian faith to the Native Americans.²³ The college also was closely aligned to the political and religious institutions of Virginia. Henry B. Adams observed,

The head of the college was the head of the Church in Virginia, and there was a representative of the college in the house of Burgesses down to the Revolution. These facts merely illustrate the intimacy of educational, ecclesiastical, and political relations in the social microcosm at Williamsburg.²⁴

In his Autobiography, Jefferson recalled that the College of William and Mary was "an establishment purely of the church of England," and he pointed out that the "Visitors were required to be all of that church, the professors to subscribe to its 39 Articles, its students to learn its Catechism, and one of its fundamental objects was declared to raise up ministers for the Church."²⁵ Jefferson opposed the idea that the college should be used as an instrument of the church, and in 1779, when he became the governor of Virginia, he forced the removal of the school of theology.²⁶

Although Jefferson's college was under the direction of the Anglican church during the years he studied there, he was able to take all of his course work with the one professor who was not a member of the Anglican clergy, Dr. William Small.²⁷ Dr. Small normally would not have been teaching at William and Mary; however, he had been temporarily hired to replace the faculty who had lost their positions due to their protests over a reduction in the salaries of the clergy.²⁸

In his Autobiography, Jefferson asserted that having the opportunity to know Dr. Small "was my great good fortune, and what probably fixed the destiny of my life"²⁹ Jefferson became the daily companion of Dr. Small, and he said that from Small's "conversation I got my first view of the expansion of science and of the system

of things in which they are placed."³⁰ Dr. Small has been described by Dumas Malone as being a "minor torchbearer of the Enlightenment."³¹ Jefferson remembered Dr. Small as a "man profound in most of the branches of science, with a happy talent of communication, correct and gentlemanly manners, [and] an enlarged and liberal mind."³² Dr. Small taught mathematics, metaphysics, physics, logic, rhetoric, ethics, and belles-letters.³³ One of Jefferson's favorite subjects was mathematics. In math, Jefferson said, "We have no theories . . . no uncertainties remain on the mind; all is demonstration and satisfaction."³⁴ In 1762, Dr. Small returned to England and Jefferson left the College of William and Mary in order to study law under George Wythe. However, Jefferson did not forget Dr. Small, and in 1775, he sent him thirty-six bottles of Madeira.³⁵

Jefferson studied law with George Wythe from 1762 until 1767 when he was ready to begin his own law practice. Wythe would become one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Jefferson maintained a lifelong friendship with him. Jefferson wrote in his Autobiography that George Wythe "continued to be my faithful and beloved mentor in youth, and my affectionate friend through life."³⁶ Jefferson considered Wythe to be the best classical scholar in Virginia.³⁷ An English traveler, Andrew Burnaby, described meeting George Wythe in a book called Travels Through North America. Burnaby said that Wythe had "a

perfect knowledge of Greek and ancient philosophy, particularly the Platonic."³⁸ Malone argued that Wythe "never lured Jefferson into Platonic paths, but he led him to improve his Greek"³⁹ While Malone does not follow this observation with a discussion of Jefferson's reluctance to be lured "into Platonic paths," Jefferson developed substantial reasons for not being enamored with the philosophy of Plato, particularly as used by contemporary church-men.

In 1765, while under the guidance of George Wythe, Jefferson drew up a course of study that suggested the books that should be read by a young law student, and the order in which to read them. He revised these recommendations in 1814, but the outline remained essentially intact.⁴⁰ In his correspondence, Jefferson described an entire day's reading for a student. He did so with the recommendation that those times of the day when the mind is most vigorous should be used "in marshaling the business of the day."⁴¹

The first order of the day included studies in "Ethics, Religion, natural and sectarian, and Natural law,"⁴² Under these subjects, Jefferson recommended over forty books by authors such as Arthur Young, who wrote Rural Economy, as well as Buffon, John Locke, Conyers Middleton, and Joseph Priestley. Under the subject of Ethics and Natural religion, he recommended reading Condorcet's Progrès de l'Esprit Humain, and under the subject of sectarian

religion, Jefferson suggested that the student read the Bible, the New Testament, as well as Priestley's Corruptions of Christianity. Other titles on religion or of ethical interest included Locke's Conduct of the Human Mind in Search After Truth, Seneca's Philosophica, and Cicero's Tusculanae. Jefferson expected the student to begin this reading first thing in the morning and proceed until eight o'clock.⁴³ From eight to twelve, he recommended reading law books, and from twelve to one, he recommended reading politics. The afternoon was reserved for history, and the early evening was set aside for belles-letters and poetry, especially Shakespeare.⁴⁴ In his recommendations for reading history, he suggested that the student begin with ancient history, reading the "Greek and Latin originals"⁴⁵ He also recommended Gibbon's Decline of the Roman Empire; however, no medieval chroniclers were included in the day's study. After reading ancient history, the student was advised to read works in modern history such as Russel's History of Modern Europe.⁴⁶ By completely omitting the Middle Ages, Jefferson eliminated much of the Neo-Platonic tradition from the student's studies. By moving directly from Gibbon's Decline and Fall to Priestley's Corruption of Christianity, the student would be exposed to themes consistent with Jefferson's own views on Plato's influence on Christianity.

While the work of Priestley is so important that it needs to be discussed by itself in a separate section, it seems worthwhile to briefly consider what Gibbon had to say as to Plato's influence on the Christian system. In the twenty-first chapter of the Decline and Fall, Gibbon noted that "The genius of Plato, . . . ventured to explore the mysterious nature of the Deity."⁴⁷ Gibbon noted that Plato considered "the divine nature under the threefold modification--of the first cause, the reason, or Logos, and the soul or spirit of the universe."⁴⁸ In the Christian system, the first cause would be understood to be God the Father, the Logos would be Christ, and the spirit would be the Holy Spirit. In the teachings of Plato, these three aspects of the divine nature were also understood to be three gods. Gibbon pointed out that:

. . . the three archical or original principles were represented in the Platonic system as three Gods, united with each other by a mysterious and ineffable generation; and Logos was particularly considered under the more accessible characters of the Son of an Eternal Father, and the Creator and Governor of the world.⁴⁹

Gibbon went on to observe that "the theology of Plato might have been forever confounded with the philosophical visions of the Academy, . . . if the name and divine attributes of the Logos had not been confirmed by the celestial pen of the last and most divine of the Evangelists [i.e., John]."⁵⁰

Once the idea that the Logos of Plato could be useful in justifying the divinity of Christ, Christian

theologians were able to argue that Jesus was God. Gibbon proceeded to argue that the Church became intolerant by noting that the "Christians formed a numerous and disciplined society; and the jurisdiction of their laws and magistrates was strictly exercised over the minds of the faithful."⁵¹ Such an argument would most likely strike a sympathetic chord in Jefferson, especially when Gibbon complained that the "freedom of private judgment [was] submitted to the public wisdom of synods; the authority of the theologians was determined by his ecclesiastical rank"⁵² With religious truths being determined by synods and the authority of the theologians supported by their institutional position, the dangers of aligning the interests of church and state became frightening, particularly to those who embraced the concept of freedom of religious thought. Gibbon argued that the "episcopal successors of the apostles inflicted the censures of the church on those who deviated from the orthodox belief."⁵³ To further emphasize the influence of Plato's philosophy within the orthodox views of the church and the manner in which they were used, Gibbon argued:

A metaphysical argument became the cause or pretence of political contests; the subtleties of the Platonic school were used as the badges of popular factions, and the distance which separated their respective tenets was enlarged or magnified by the acrimony of dispute.⁵⁴

Evidence such as this illustrates that Jefferson was well within the mainstream of eighteenth century

Enlightenment thought in regard to his views upon the Platonic influence within the Christian doctrine. Although Dr. Joseph Priestley will have a profound impact upon Jefferson's religious thought, expounding in depth the elements of Platonic thought within Christianity, to obtain a better understanding of how Jefferson might have worked with such material, it seems worthwhile to consider the method of study that he recommended. Along with his recommended reading list, which contained authors such as Priestley, Gibbon, Cicero, and Seneca, as well as the Bible, Jefferson stressed the importance of following a process of responding to whatever the student was reading. Jefferson wrote:

Criticize the writing of any book whatsoever, committing the criticism to writing. Translate into the different style, to wit, the elevated, the middling, and the familiar. Orators and poets will furnish subjects of the first, historians of the second, and epistolary and comic writers of the third. Undertake at first, short compositions, or themes, letters, etc., paying great attention to the elegance and correctness of your language. Read the orations of Demosthenes and Cicero; analyze these orations, and examine the correctness of the disposition, language, figures, state of the cases, arguments, etc.; read good samples also of English eloquence.⁵⁵

An elegant writing style was important to Jefferson. He acknowledged in his Autobiography that Plato was a great stylist, and he never denied that Plato was one of the most eloquent writers of antiquity.⁵⁶ However, Jefferson insisted that evidence and argument must provide the substance for that eloquence.

One of the most valuable documents of Jefferson's educational development is the commonplace book that he kept from the 1750s through the 1770s.⁵⁷ The earliest entries have been dated through handwriting analysis to be from the 1750s, around the time that Jefferson was in Mr. Maury's school. Jefferson kept making entries in his book throughout his years at William and Mary as well as during the time he was with George Wythe.⁵⁸ The commonplace book is illustrative of Jefferson's method of study, for he used it to make extensive entries from his readings. The quotations from the ancient authors that Jefferson selected are frequent and varied. They reveal the kinds of things from the ancient authors that appealed to Jefferson as he emerged into maturity. In all, Jefferson copied selections from fourteen classical authors. The most frequently cited was Euripides; Plato was not quoted at all.⁵⁹

Jefferson's selections from the ancient authors can be organized into several groups. The most frequently chosen quotations, however, reveal an interest in ethical and religious questions. Many of the examples that Jefferson quoted from Cicero demonstrate a concern with man's relationship to God. From the Tusculan Disputations, Jefferson copied:

All men think that a divine power exists, and that is not the result of human conference or convention, it is not belief established by regulation as by stature, but in every inquiry the unanimity of the races of the world must be regarded as a law of nature.⁶⁰

As an Enlightenment thinker, Jefferson would certainly read Cicero's text carefully for anything that suggested principles which conform to the "laws of nature." Also, the idea that religious belief is not a matter to be determined through "human conference" would appeal to Jefferson.

The idea of appealing to the "unanimity of the races of the world" as a basis for establishing truth or the "law of nature" was an important aspect of Jefferson's religious and political thinking. In 1785, he wrote to his nephew Peter Carr, "Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly."⁶¹ When he wrote the Declaration of Independence, he argued that one of the reasons for making the Declaration known to the world was to give "decent respect to the opinions of mankind"⁶² The affirmations of the existence of a "divine nature" that Cicero argued for by appealing to world opinion also seem to be influential in Jefferson's thinking in terms of "the laws of nature and of nature's God"⁶³ In a practical sense, Jefferson wanted the ancient authors to help provide an historical framework wherein religious and ethical considerations could be discussed freely with a rational sense of human understanding.

Jefferson copied several entries from Herodotus. The first quote was from book II of Herodotus, a book

dedicated to the history and culture of the ancient Egyptians. It is interesting to note that the first entries Jefferson copied from Herodotus dealt with what had become a physical religious practice, the act of circumcision. Jefferson wrote that, ". . . the Colchians, the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians are the only nations that have from the first practiced circumcision. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine acknowledge of themselves that they learnt the custom from the Egyptians."⁶⁴ Jefferson included a note after he made this entry which said, "compare with Gen c.17.v.10."⁶⁵

Jefferson shows here an interest in where and how such practices originate, and how they are perpetuated. The study of history provided Jefferson with information that demonstrated how religious practices and dogmas were transformed by different cultures through time. Later, he will use his reading of the ancient authors to bolster agreement with a near contemporary, the English philosopher Henry Saint-John Viscount Bolingbroke, who charged that the additions to the teachings of Jesus made by philosophical theologians were an adulteration of Christianity. Jefferson quoted rather extensively from Bolingbroke in his commonplace book. In one passage, Jefferson copied Bolingbroke's arguments concerning Christian origins:

We assume that the son of god, who was sent by the father to make a covenant with mankind, and to established a new kingdom on the ruins of paganism,

executed his commission imperfectly; we assume, that he died to redeem mankind from sin, and from death the wages of sin, but that he left them at the same time without sufficient information concerning that faith in him, and that obedience to his law, which could alone make this redemption effectual to all the gracious purposes of it. In short, we assume that they, who were converted to Christianity by Christ himself, and who died before the supposed imperfection of his revelation had been supplied by the apostles, by Paul particularly, lived and died without a sufficient knowledge of the terms of salvation; than which nothing can be said more abominable.⁶⁶

Bolingbroke's critical assessment of the additions made to the Christian religion is indicative of the rational mind of the Enlightenment. In a rather long passage from Bolingbroke, Jefferson traced an argument that raised some interesting questions concerning the Jews and the authenticity of the orthodox Christian message. Bolingbroke wondered, if the Jews were the chosen people of God, why were they not prepared for his divine son? Bolingbroke went on to argue that the nations which had been prepared for the orthodox Christian message were those nations that had already been influenced by Platonic philosophy. Jefferson copied Bolingbroke's argument that:

They [the Jews] believed universally in one god, but they were not universally disposed to believe in his son. Monotheism might indispose them to the gospel, as well as their attachment to the law of Moses. The expectation of the Messiah did not clash with monotheism. But they might imagine, that the belief of god the son, and god the holy ghost; did so very manifestly; the trinity not having been early reconciled to the unity of god. Other nations seemed to be better prepared by philosophy, by that of Plato particularly, and by the polytheistical notions of divine natures,

some in the godhead, and some out of it, for the reception of the gospel, or of the theology which the teachers of the gospel taught.⁶⁷

From his earliest writings as a student, Jefferson traced the influences of various religious and cultural circumstances through time. From his study of the ancient authors and the writings of his contemporaries, Jefferson was exposed to the idea that orthodox Christianity had been influenced by the philosophy of Plato. Perhaps he would have been less concerned with this fact if the orthodox view of Christ as God had been arrived at through a universal understanding, such as that which Cicero called for in determining natural law. Instead, the orthodox view had been worked out only after the death of Jesus, and it had been worked out by a committee of theologians who had been influenced by pagan philosophy, particularly Plato. To the extent that this belief system was merely a question of faith and personal belief, Jefferson was understanding, compassionate, and tolerant. However, he would not tolerate any belief system which was forced upon people through the authority of the church or the state.

Jefferson emerged into maturity with his intellect disciplined and open; his human understanding tolerant and compassionate. He confronted the basic paradox of his time which existed in the tension between the rational and religious mind. He opposed the deep entrenchment of traditional institutional religion. His mind, trained in

the writers of antiquity and sensitive to the intransigence of the contemporary clergy, centered on the sources of corruptions within the Christian doctrine. He recognized the beauty and instructive value of Plato for mastering classical rhetoric. He also recognized the power and endurance of Platonism in the constructs of what he saw as a corruption of Christianity.

NOTES

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³Ibid.

⁴Gay, The Enlightenment, 207.

⁵Thomas Jefferson to William Short, August 4, 1820, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1436.

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⁸Ibid., 229.

⁹Charles B. Sanford, The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1984), 3.

¹⁰Henry Stephens Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York: 1858), 555, quoted in Sanford, The Religious Life, 3:4.

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¹²Richard Beale Davis, Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia: 1790-1830 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 6.

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¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Dumas Malone, Jefferson the Virginian (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948), 39-40.

¹⁶Ibid., 39.

¹⁷Sarah Randolph, The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Harper, 1871; reprint Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1978), 37.

¹⁸Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 33.

¹⁹Ibid. The entire list of Peter Jefferson's books can be seen in the inventory list reprinted in "Books in Colonial Virginia" in The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 10 (1902-1903): 389-405

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²¹Reverend Maury to his son, February 17, 1762, in Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 45.

²²Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 45.

²³Herbert B. Adams, The College of William and Mary: A Contribution to the History of Higher Education, With Suggestions for its National Promotion printed in Circulars of Information of the Bureau of Education No. 1-1887. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 17.

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²⁷Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 51.

²⁸Ibid.

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³¹Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 55.

³²Jefferson, Autobiography in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 4.

³³Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 54.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 65.

³⁶Jefferson, Autobiography in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 4-5.

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⁴⁰Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), 217.

⁴¹Thomas Jefferson to Bernard Moore, 1765, quoted in Honeywell, The Educational Work, 218.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 219.

⁴⁶Ibid., 220.

⁴⁷Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 40 of Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1989), 307.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 309.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Thomas Jefferson to Bernard Moore, (no specific date given), 1765, quoted in Honeywell, The Educational Work, 220.

⁵⁶Jefferson, Autobiography in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 96.

⁵⁷Douglas L. Wilson, ed., Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 162.

⁶⁰Ibid., 56-57.

⁶¹Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 19, 1785, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 815.

⁶²Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence" in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 19.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Wilson, ed., Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book, 23.

⁶⁵Ibid. The scripture that Jefferson referred to, Genesis 17:10, concerns God speaking to Abraham: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

⁶⁶Henry Saint-John, Viscount Bolingbroke, Philosophical Works, 2:329-331, quoted in Wilson, ed., Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book, 36.

⁶⁷Ibid., 31.

THE PROBLEM OF PLATONIC CHRISTIANITY:

JEFFERSON'S CORRESPONDENCE

"Jesus . . . endeavoured to bring them to the principles of a pure Deism, and juster notions of the attributes of God."

Thomas Jefferson, 1803

JEFFERSON AND ADAMS:

THE CORRESPONDENCE ON PLATO

Thomas Jefferson corresponded with hundreds of people and kept a meticulous record of every letter he sent or received from 1783 to 1826.¹ It has been estimated that Jefferson's correspondence exceeds over fifty thousand separate letters.² "The letters of a person, especially of one whose business has been chiefly transacted by letters," wrote Jefferson, "form the only full and genuine journal of his life."³

In his correspondence, Jefferson revealed aspects of himself which often he never willingly made public. His thoughts on religion in particular he reserved for his private correspondence, with men such as John Adams, a mutually strong personality. Jefferson and Adams had had a politically adversarial relationship, but in later years their deep mutual respect produced a thoughtful personal

correspondence. Between 1777 and 1826, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams exchanged a total of four hundred and fifty letters.⁴ In their letters, they discussed personal matters as well as politics, philosophy, literature, foreign affairs, and education. Their correspondence and friendship suffered a ten-year interlude (1801-1811), during which they did not communicate with one another.⁵ At the urging of a mutual friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, they resumed their correspondence in 1812 and carried it forward until the year in which they both died; coincidentally, on the same day, July 4, 1826. During the course of this final fourteen-year period, Jefferson and Adams exchanged one hundred and sixty-three letters. At the heart of this correspondence was a lively exchange on the subject of the Christian religion. Adams had a natural inclination towards the study of theology,⁶ and Jefferson demonstrated an endless fascination with the study of how Christian doctrine had changed over time. More specifically, both Jefferson and Adams were interested in discussing the merits of the ancient authors, especially Plato, as an influence on the teachings of the Christian Church.

From 1812 to 1817, Adams and Jefferson discussed Plato in ten separate letters. Between 1812 and 1814, the role of Plato in relation to the Christian doctrine was the subject of four of these letters. As part of their dialogue on Plato, Jefferson and Adams exchanged eleven additional

letters considering the views of Dr. Joseph Priestley. Priestley had written extensively on the history of the Christian Church and had documented adequately, to the satisfaction of both Jefferson and Adams, the extent to which Plato had been used by the early church fathers. Thus, at the center of their dialogue on Plato and Christianity stood the views of Joseph Priestley. With Priestley, Adams and Jefferson had come to share the view that Plato had been manipulated by some of the early church fathers such as Saint Augustine. Taken together, the ten Plato letters and the eleven Priestley letters are an interesting indication of how Thomas Jefferson eventually came to view eighteenth century Christianity, and they also shed a significant light on what Jefferson meant when he would write to others, such as Charles Thomson, ". . . I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call me infidel and themselves Christians, and preachers of the gospel,"7

Jefferson and Adams renewed their correspondence in January of 1812. They developed their conversation on the subject of religion and Plato very slowly. It was almost as if they were maneuvering around one another, while being careful and solicitous of each other's friendship and affection. Jefferson made the first reference to an ancient author on January 12, 1812, when he wrote, "I have given up

newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier."⁸ John Adams responded on February 3, 1812, and for the first time, the name of Plato entered the correspondence between them. He congratulated Jefferson for giving up the reading of "newspapers for Newton" and went on to say that he wished he had "devoted to Newton and his fellows that time which I fear has been wasted on Plato . . . [and] twenty others upon subjects which mankind is determined to never understand," ⁹ With this first reference to Plato, Jefferson had received a clear indication that Adams would agree with him that much of this ancient author's work was incomprehensible.

Just as Adams was the first to mention Plato, he was also the first to interject the opinions of Dr. Joseph Priestley into the correspondence with Jefferson. While admitting that Jefferson "may be surprised to find me making a transition to such a subject as prophecies," Adams informed Jefferson that Priestley "told me soberly, coolly and deliberately that . . . he fully believed upon the authority of prophecy that the French nation would establish a free government and that the king of France who had been executed, was the first of the ten horns of the great beast," ¹⁰ Adams went on to apologize for raising such a "strange vagary," but he made it clear that he disapproved of prophecy as being "unphilosophical and

inconsistent with the political safety of states and nations. . . ."11 While this letter demonstrated an interest in the millennium, Adams said his purpose in raising this issue was to inquire into Jefferson's opinion on the Native American prophet Tenskwatawa, whom he referred to as Wabash, as well as the Richmond prophet Christopher Macpherson.¹²

Jefferson responded to Adams on April 20, 1812. He ignored Adams' comment about Priestley's faith in prophecy. This will in fact become one of the characteristics of the Adams-Jefferson correspondence. Jefferson only responded to the mention of Priestley on four separate occasions. Rather than breach a subject that might bring up a point of disagreement with Adams, Jefferson always sought the ground of common agreement. Jefferson also had maintained a close friendship with Dr. Priestley, and in 1802, Priestley had dedicated his book, A General History of the Christian Church, to President Jefferson.¹³ Since Priestley had died in 1804, it is hardly surprising that Jefferson ignored Adams' story of a personal conversation that had passed between two of his friends. Jefferson did, however, share Adams' opinion in regard to prophecy. He demonstrated this by commenting on the Richmond prophet Christopher Macpherson, whom Jefferson described as ". . . crazy, foggy, his head always in the clouds, and rhapsodising what neither himself nor anyone could understand."¹⁴ He

went on to discount Tenskwatawa as being "more rogue than fool,"15

With this exchange of letters, Jefferson and Adams slowly began to touch upon religious ideas that reflected the distaste which they both shared for metaphysical speculation. On June 28, 1812, Adams furthered the dialogue on Plato by comparing the doctrines of Plato to those of the Indians. Adams pointed out that Plato had "borrowed his doctrines from Oriental and Egyptian philosophers,"16 He then described the Platonic philosophy as being based upon the idea that there was

1. One God, the good
2. The ideas, the thought, the reason, the intellect, the logos, the ratio, of God
3. Matter, the universe, the production of the logos, as contemplation of God. This matter was the source of evil.¹⁷

Adams compared these three points to the Native American's religious ideas by suggesting that "the great spirit . . . [is] the parent of the good."¹⁸ Beyond this point, however, the religious opinions of the Native Americans seemed to merely serve as a foil for Adams to make further comments upon Plato's teachings in comparison to what has traditionally been understood as deism. Adams went on to write:

The Watchmaker has in his head an idea of the system of a watch before he makes it. The mechanician [sic] of the universe had a complete idea of the universe before he made it; and this idea, this logos, was almighty, or at least powerful enough to produce the world, but it

must be made of matter which was eternal. For creation out of nothing was impossible.¹⁹

After Adams connected the Platonic doctrine of the logos with the deistic idea of the great watchmaker, he suggested that the Native Americans were "not metaphisicians [sic] enough to have discovered" the idea of a logos.²⁰ The tone of his letter indicated that the Native Americans were probably better off without an idea of the logos serving as an intermediary force through which God created the world, for he went on to tell Jefferson, "I could make a system, too."²¹ He proceeded to describe how the "Indian Yell" resembled the "howl" of the "seven hundred thousand soldiers of Zingis, when the whole or any part of them went to battle,"²² This led him to conclude that "America was peopled from Asia."²³ Adams went on to tell Jefferson that he was "weary of philosophers, theologians, politicians, and historians."²⁴ With a simple affirmation of what he actually believed, over and above the vagaries of metaphysics and abstract philosophy and theology, Adams said, "I could express my faith in shorter terms. He who loves the workman and his work, and does what he can to preserve and improve it, shall be accepted of him."²⁵

Jefferson did not respond to Adams' analysis of Plato's doctrine, nor did he venture to involve himself in any religious dialogue by way of comparing the ideas of one culture to another. While Adams stated that he was weary of

philosophers in June of 1812, by May 29, 1813, he had encountered a book that stimulated him to ask Jefferson several questions. The book was titled Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A.²⁶ This book captivated Adams' attention, and it proved to be upsetting to Jefferson. Adams wrote to Jefferson on May 29, 1813, and asked him if he had seen the Memoirs of Lindsey. Of particular interest to Adams were two letters that had been printed in the appendix "from Thomas Jefferson Esq. President of the United States to Dr. Joseph Priestley."²⁷ Adams refrained from commenting on the letters that he had discovered in Lindsey's book until later, but he did tell Jefferson that he had "much to say on the subject."²⁸

Before Jefferson had time to respond, Adams wrote again on June 10, 1813. He began his letter with a quote from the letter that Jefferson had sent to Priestley on March 21, 1801. The quote Adams chose reflected an opinion Jefferson held in 1801 in regard to the Federalists, and Adams demanded an explanation from Jefferson when he said:

What an effort of bigotry in politics and religion have we gone through! The barbarians really flattered themselves, they should be able to bring back the times of Vandalism, when ignorance put everything in to the hands of power and priest craft. All advances in science were proscribed as innovations; they pretended to praise and encourage education, but it was to be the education of our ancestors; We were to look backwards, not forwards, for improvement; The President himself declaring, that we were never to expect to go beyond them in real science.²⁹

Adams selected the phrase the "President himself declaring" to focus his attention on, and said, "I myself must have been mean'd."³⁰ Adams further went on to say that he disavowed "the sentiment, that you have attributed to me in your letter to Dr. Priestley."³¹ He demanded proof that he had ever been so critical of education, for such an idea, Adams argued, was "totally incongruous to every principle of my mind and every sentiment of my heart for three score years at least."³² While he demanded proof from Jefferson, Adams was also quick to reassure him that "you may expect, many more expostulations from one who has loved and esteemed you for eight and thirty years."³³

This inquiry from Adams drew out Jefferson's first mention of Priestley's name during the course of their correspondence. Jefferson acknowledged the sense of betrayal that he felt from his private correspondence being made public. He told Adams that he had never heard of Lindsey before. Rather than immediately addressing Adams' concerns, Jefferson said that he was alarmed that the publication of these letters would "gratify the priesthood with new occasion of repeating their comminations against me."³⁴ In this discussion with Adams, Jefferson acknowledged a prior conflict with the clergy. Jefferson went on to say that the priesthood "wish it to be believed that he can have no religion who advocates its freedom. This was not the doctrine of Priestley, and I

honored him for the example of liberality he set to his order."³⁵

Adams surely would have been aware of the various conflicts that Jefferson had encountered with the clergy. After all, as the author of Virginia's Bill for Religious Freedom, Jefferson had been at odds with established religion since the beginning of his political career. But it does not seem likely that Adams was aware of the deep sense of affection that Jefferson had for Priestley until after he had read the letters in Lindsey's Memoirs. A portion of Jefferson's letter to Priestley that Adams did not refer to was Jefferson's statement, "Yours [Priestley's] is one of the few lives precious to mankind, and for the continuance of which every thinking man is solicitous."³⁶ If Adams was aware of the closeness between Jefferson and Priestley prior to 1813, there is no mention of it in their correspondence.

Jefferson went on to remind Adams that one of the differences between their parties was the question "on the improvability of the human mind"³⁷ He continued by arguing that the Federalists "denied improvement," but Jefferson felt that "no definite limits could be assigned to that progress."³⁸ While Jefferson considered what separated his views from the Federalists, he was quick to say that he never had Adams truly in mind, and that "we were far from considering you as the author of all the measures we

blamed."³⁹ At this point in their correspondence, Jefferson and Adams seemed to have reached a turning point where old differences have been acknowledged without causing a second breach in their friendship. Jefferson was reticent about opening old wounds and told Adams that he would "see with reluctance the passions of that day rekindled in this,"⁴⁰ For his part, Adams wrote back and said, "Lindsey's Memoirs will do no harm to you or me."⁴¹ Adams even went on to say the first kind word in regard to Dr. Priestley by telling Jefferson that he knew him briefly while he was in England and had found him to be a man who was "learned, scientific and moral"⁴² Adams went on to share Jefferson's alarm in regard to the clergy, and he warned Jefferson that "spiritual tyranny and ecclesiastical domination are beginning in our country:"⁴³

After Jefferson shared his concern with Adams that the clergy would have new occasions to denounce him and to call forth divine threats upon him as a sinner by way of comminations, Adams responded with several letters that were critical of the churchmen. On June 28, 1813, Adams wrote Jefferson that "the denunciations of the priesthood are fulminated against every advocate for a complete freedom of religion."⁴⁴ Adams argued that the priests would condemn "every man who disbelieved or doubted the resurrection of Jesus or the miracles of the New Testament."⁴⁵ He also told Jefferson, however, that Priestley had denounced all

Trinitarians as being blasphemers and idol worshipers.⁴⁶ What may have been an even harsher criticism upon the traditions of the Christian church than the persecution of dissenters and the unorthodox was Adams' opinion that many volumes of ancient writings had been destroyed by "Ecclesiastical and Imperial despotism . . . to conceal their frauds."⁴⁷ In addition to the works of Livy and Tacitus, Cicero, and fifty gospels, Adams asked "why are the histories of all nations, more ancient than the Chr[is]tian era lost? Who destroyed the Alexandria library?" He answered that "I believe the Christian priests, Jewish Rabbis, Grecian sages and Roman Emperors had as great a hand in it as Turks and Mohamitans."⁴⁸

Adams returned to this theme on two more occasions, and each time he altered the emphasis of blame. While the danger of the combined interests of church and state are implicit as they both seem to be colluding in the repression and destruction of documents that may threaten their monopoly upon knowledge, the religious interests seem to bear the most responsibility in Adams' argument. On October 4, 1813, Adams blamed the destruction of the library at Alexandria on the "Jews Grecians Romans and Christians," saying that they "all conspired, or connived at that savage catastrophe."⁴⁹ A month later, Adams wrote that "I suspect Platonick [sic] Christianity, pharisaical [sic] Judaism, or machivilian politics, in this case; as

in all other cases of the destruction of records and literary monuments."⁵⁰

After this critical expose of the tragic destruction of ancient literature by the hands of the censoring religious and state authorities, Adams returned to the subject of the letters which Jefferson had written to Dr. Priestley. On July 16, 1813, Adams wrote to Jefferson and quoted so extensively from one of Jefferson's letters to Priestley that Jefferson was essentially re-reading what he had written himself in 1803. Adams was obviously fascinated with the content of Jefferson's letter to Priestley, and if it had not been for Lindsey's Memoirs, Adams may never have had the opportunity to know its contents. The letter to which Adams directed Jefferson's attention was written on April 9, 1803. In this letter, Jefferson wrote to Priestley an outline of his "view of the Christian system."⁵¹

Adams used this letter to continue the discussion on the subject of religion with Jefferson. Jefferson had previously told Priestley that he would break his outline on the Christian religion into three essential parts. First, Jefferson said he would "take a general view of the moral doctrines of the most remarkable of the ancient philosophers, of whose ethics we have sufficient information to make an estimate; say of Pythagoras, Epicurus, Epictetus, Socrates, Cicero, Seneca, Antoninus."⁵² By excluding Plato from his list, Jefferson was maintaining a consistent method

of eliminating Platonic doctrines from the study of the Christian religion. While he included Socrates in his list of remarkable philosophers, Jefferson preferred Xenophon's history of Socrates, and he once said, "Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the Memorabilia of Xenophon; for Plato makes him one of his Collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies" ⁵³

Adams went on to further quote from Jefferson's letter to Priestley. As Jefferson detailed his outline of the Christian system in this letter, he said that the second part of the study would entail a "view of the Deism and ethicks [sic] of the Jews, and shew [sic] in what a degraded state they were, and the necessity they presented of a reformation." ⁵⁴ The final portion of Jefferson's work dealt directly with the role of Jesus and is worth quoting in full. Adams quoted Jefferson as writing:

I should proceed to a view of the life, character, and doctrine of Jesus, who sensible of the incorrectness of their [the Jews] Ideas of the Deity, and of Morality, and endeavoured to bring them to the Principles of a pure Deism, and juster Notions of the Attributes of God; to reform their moral doctrines to the Standard of reason, justice and Philanthropy and to inculcate the belief in a future State. This view would purposely omit the question of his Divinity, and even of his Inspiration. To do him justice, it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter, not having been committed to Writing by himself, but by the most unlettered of Men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him, when much was forgotten, much misunderstood, and presented in paradoxical Shapes. Yet such are the fragments remaining, as to show a master workman, and that his System of Morality was the most benevolent and sublime,

probably that has been ever taught, and more perfect than those of the ancient Philosophers. His character and Doctrines, have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special Disciples, and who have disfigured and sophisticated his Actions and precepts from view of personal interest, so as to induce the unthinking part of Mankind, to throw off the whole System in disgust, and to pass sentence, as an Impostor, on the most innocent, the most benevolent, the most eloquent and sublime Character that ever has been exhibited to Man. This is the Outline.⁵⁵

The response that Adams had to this was an immediate "'Sancte Socrate! Ora pro nobis ["Holy Socrates! Pray for us"].'"⁵⁶ He went on to share with Jefferson some things that Priestley had written in a letter to Lindsey in reference to Jefferson. Since Jefferson had never heard of Lindsey's Memoirs before, it is likely that he was reading Priestley's comments in reference to him for the first time. Adams quoted Priestley writing of Jefferson as saying, "He is generally considered an Unbeliever: if so, however, he cannot be far from Us, He now attends publick [sic] worship very regularly, and his moral Conduct was never impeached."⁵⁷ Adams seemed perplexed by this comment from Priestley and went on to affirm that he considered Jefferson a good Christian by saying, "Now, I see not, but you are as good a Christian as Priestley and Lindsey. Piety and Morality were the End and Object of the Christian System according to them, and according to you."⁵⁸

Adams returned to the topic of religion in his next two letters to Jefferson. On July 18, 1813, he wrote, "I have more to say on religion. For more than sixty years I

have been attentive to this great subject."⁵⁹ Adams listed several authors that he had read over the past sixty years, and he told Jefferson, "I have been a diligent student for many years in books whose titles you have never seen."⁶⁰ Adams said that he had read books by authors such as Cappe, Farmer, Tucker, Hopkins, Dr. Clark, Dr. Waterland, and Condercet. He also told Jefferson that "I do not believe you have read much of Priestley's Corruptions of Christianity."⁶¹

Four days later on July 22, 1813, Adams wrote a letter to Jefferson that included two long quotes from Priestley. In these quotes, Priestley said that he had begun a new work that was similar to his pamphlet "Socrates and Jesus Compared."⁶² According to Priestley, this new work of his was an "undertaking that Mr. Jefferson recommends to me."⁶³ Adams went on to ask Jefferson if he had any knowledge in regard to Priestley's last written efforts. He lamented the fact that Priestley did not live long enough to have his final manuscript published. Adams expressed a sense of regret that he had not been closer to Priestley. He told Jefferson that "Scarcely any thing that has happened to me, in my curious life has made a deeper Impression upon me, than that such a learned ingenious scientific and talented Madcap as Cooper, could have had influence enough to make Priestley my Enemy."⁶⁴ The man that Adams referred to was Thomas Cooper, who had been a

close friend of Priestley's. What Adams did not tell Jefferson was that Priestley had sent Cooper to meet Adams, and had given him a letter of introduction. Cooper also was the author of a work entitled Political Essays, "for which in 1801 he was convicted for libel, under the Sedition Act, and sentenced to six months imprisonment and a fine."⁶⁵

Cooper's Political Essays had been critical of Adams' administration, and he suffered the consequences under the Sedition Act. With a sense of loss, however, Adams told Jefferson, "If Priestley had lived, I should certainly have corresponded with him I should propose to him a thousand, a million Questions. And no "M[an] was more capable or better disposed to answer them candidly than Dr. Priestley."⁶⁶

On August 22, 1813, Jefferson wrote to Adams telling him that he read all of his letters "with infinite delight."⁶⁷ Jefferson did not respond to Adams' discussion concerning the loss of friendship which Adams had experienced with Priestley. Nor did he say anything about the fate of Thomas Cooper, for whom Jefferson had high regard. He had once said that Cooper was the "greatest man in America, of powers of mind and in acquired information,"⁶⁸ Rather than touching upon topics that were perhaps best forgotten, Jefferson wrote about his own religious opinions in regard to politics and literature.

Jefferson took up the issue of politics by observing that there was an English Bill in parliament that was designed to give legal protection to the Anti-Trinitarians.⁶⁹ Jefferson connected the tyranny of religious intolerance to a Platonic influence by arguing that the clergy used the power of mystery to maintain a position of authority over the minds of men. He wrote:

I observe a bill is now in Parliament for the relief of the Anti-Trinitarians. It is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three; But this constitutes the craft, the power and the profit of the priests.⁷⁰

This is the first time in their correspondence that Jefferson connected the orthodox doctrine of the Christian Trinity with Platonic mysticism. As long as the clergy continued to teach the doctrine of the Trinity, Jefferson continued to argue,

We should all then, like the Quakers, live without an order or priests, moralize for ourselves, follow the oracle of conscience, and say nothing about what no man can understand, nor therefore believe; for I suppose belief to be the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.⁷¹

The remainder of Jefferson's letter to Adams dealt with Adams' comments and inquiries on the final manuscript of Dr. Priestley. Jefferson told Adams that Priestley's final work had been published and that he would be happy to send a copy to him.⁷² Jefferson took exception, however, to Adams' assertion that Jefferson had probably not read much of Priestley's book The History of the Corruptions of

Christianity. Jefferson told Adams that he had read Priestley's "Corruptions of Christianity, and Early Opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them, and on Middleton's writings, . . . [as] the basis of my own faith."⁷³ Jefferson was so impressed with the historical research that Priestley and Middleton had done that he told Adams that their "writings have never been answered, by quoting historical proofs, as they have done. For these facts therefore I cling to their learning, so much superior to my own."⁷⁴

Adams responded to Jefferson and confirmed the importance of religious faith being supported by the mind's rational comprehension of a reasonable doctrine. Adams wrote that "human understanding is a revelation from its Maker which can never be disputed or doubted."⁷⁵ He went further by agreeing with Jefferson that the orthodox doctrine of the Christian Trinity was incomprehensible. Since human understanding was a revelation from God, Adams argued that "This revelation has made it certain that two and one make three; and that one is not three; nor can three be one."⁷⁶

The history of how the doctrine of the Christian Trinity evolved was adequately supplied by Joseph Priestley. In The History of the Corruptions of Christianity, Priestley argued that "one of the principle causes of infidelity," was that the simple teachings of Jesus had been corrupted.⁷⁷

Priestley traced this corruption through the influence of heathen Platonic philosophers who had converted to Christianity. Priestley argued that they brought their complex metaphysical philosophy with them in their conversation and began to blend Platonic thought together with the simple teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. Priestley began his argument by pointing out that the Apostles understood that Jesus was a man, and that they never thought of him as God. To support this argument, Priestley quoted the Apostle Paul from I Timothy chapter two, verse five, where it was written, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, and man Christ Jesus."⁷⁸ Priestley commented that Paul "does not say the God, the God-man, or the super angelic being, but simply the man Christ Jesus;"⁷⁹

Priestley argued that the idea of who Christ was, and the perception of who he was, had been altered over the course of time. Priestley argued that Saint Augustine only came to the conclusion that Christ was God after "he became acquainted with the writings of Plato, which in his time were translated into Latin, in which he learned the doctrine of the Logos."⁸⁰ The reference that Priestley made to Saint Augustine coming to the decision that Christ was God can be found in the Confessions of Saint Augustine. As Priestley observed, Augustine wrote that he had thought "of my Lord Christ, as a man of excellent wisdom,"⁸¹ In book

seven, chapter twenty of the Confessions, Augustine wrote that "having read those books of the Platonists, and thence been taught to search for incorporeal truths, I saw Thy invisible things"82 In this case, Augustine went on to argue that Christ was one with God by being "begotten Co-eternal, and formedst in the beginning of thy ways"83

Priestley had found that the perception of who Christ was had changed from being that of a man, to that of God, through the Platonic doctrine of the logos.⁸⁴ Priestley also argued that the idea of the Christian Trinity was also a result of Platonic philosophy. Priestley pointed out that Plato had spoken

. . . of the divine mind as having existed from eternity, but having within itself ideas or archetypes of whatever was to exist . . . he [Plato] styled Logos . . . [and] gave the name of a second God, saying, "the Lord and maker of the Universe, whom we justly call God, made a second God, visible and sensible."⁸⁵

Priestley further argued that the "Christian philosophers having once got the idea that the Logos might be interpreted as Christ, proceeded to explain what John says of the Logos, in the introduction of his gospel,"86 In the passage that Priestley referred to, the Apostle John had written, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁸⁷

Priestley also argued in An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ that the Platonic doctrine

of the Logos led the "Platonic Christian," not only to an improper understanding of the true nature of God, but it also had a tendency to lead the Christian into a life of withdrawal from society. Priestley argued this point by saying the "monastic life was also greatly promoted by the Platonic doctrine of the union of the soul to God, attainable by contemplation and prayer, which was eagerly adopted by many Christians, who thought it wise to neglect and mortify the body, and to give their whole attention to the soul."⁸⁸ To a man such as Jefferson, who spent his life actively involved in the practical affairs of men, a philosophy which leads towards the withdrawal from society would be naturally rejected.

After Jefferson had informed Adams that he based his faith upon Priestley's History of the Corruptions of Christianity and An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, he returned in his next letter to the subject of Platonic Christianity. On October 12, 1813, Jefferson wrote that the pure principles that Jesus taught could only be discovered after "we . . . 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"⁸⁹ Jefferson implicated the Platonists in a long series of philosophical schools of thought that all seemed to have influenced Christianity. Jefferson wrote:

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, Aeons and Daemons male and female, with a long train of Etc. Etc. Etc. or, shall I say at once, of Nonsense.⁹⁰

After Jefferson told Adams what he would eliminate from the doctrines of the Christian church so as to come upon the pure principles that Jesus taught, he went on to inform Adams that he had already edited his own Bible "by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging, the matter that is evidently his, [Jesus'] and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill."⁹¹ Jefferson considered the result of his edited Bible to be the doctrine that had been "professed and acted on by the unlettered Apostolic fathers and the Christians of the 1st century."⁹² Jefferson argued that the Christians who came after the first century had corrupted the doctrine of Christ. He referred to them by saying:

Their Platonising successors indeed, in after times, in order to legitimate the corruptions which they had incorporated in to the doctrines of Jesus, found it necessary to disavow the primitive Christians, who had taken their principles from the mouth of Jesus himself, of his Apostles, and the Fathers contemporary with them.⁹³

In the Bible that Jefferson edited for his personal use, the first chapter of the book of John was completely eliminated.⁹⁴ There is naturally no reference to the "Word" of God being in the beginning with God. Jefferson selected the book of Luke to begin his Bible, and the result was a

collection of edited verses that depicted a human Jesus preaching a moral message of love. Jefferson edited all the passages that referred to miracles or the resurrection.

Jefferson indicated to Adams that he was hopeful that one day men would understand the Christian religion without all of the complexities of metaphysical explanations that were used to support the notion that Christ was God. But at the age of seventy, he said that he could do no more than to write an outline that compared the "Graecian philosophy with that of Jesus,"⁹⁵ He went on to say that "We must leave therefore to others, younger and more learned than we, to prepare this euthanasia for Platonic Christianity, and its restoration to the primitive simplicity of its founder."⁹⁶

On December 25, 1813, Adams wrote back to Jefferson in agreement with his opinion that "the Platonic Philosophers [sic] probably concurred in the fabrication of the Christian Trinity."⁹⁷ In a long paragraph that offered a light criticism of Priestley for not writing more on Timaeus, who "was before Plato and gave him the Idea of his Timaeus, and much more of his philosophy,"⁹⁸ Adams demonstrated a masterful understanding of Plato's metaphysics. Adams said that both Plato and Timaeus begin with the assertion that matter exists. From this, Adams wrote,

Matter was capable of receiving all sorts of form: that a moving Power agitated all the Parts of it: and that an Intelligence directed the moving power; that this Intelligence produced a regular and harmonious World. This Intelligence had seen a Plan, an Idea (Logos) in conformity to which, it wrought, and without which it would not have known what it was about, nor what it wanted to do. This plan was the idea, Image or Model, which had represented, to the Supream [sic] Intelligence, the World before it existed, which had directed it, in its Action upon the moving Power, and which it contemplated in forming the Elements the Bodies and the World.⁹⁹

This is an example of the sort of logic that Jefferson and Adams both understood, and rejected due to its impact on Christian thought. From this sort of reasoning, the Platonic Christians were able to argue that Christ was the Logos or Idea of God, through whom God was able to fulfill his plan in the material world. Adams seemed to grow tired of such conjecture for he returned to a simpler statement that "the Bible is the best book in the World."¹⁰⁰ Adams was also aware that such a statement could easily lead into another complex philosophical treatise, and he added that "such parts of it as I cannot reconcile to my little Phylosophy [sic] I postpone for future investigation."¹⁰¹

Jefferson returned the correspondence with Adams to the subject of Plato on July 5, 1814. In a letter to Adams, Jefferson wrote, "I amused myself with reading seriously Plato's republic. I am wrong however in calling it amusement, for it was the heaviest task-work I ever went through."¹⁰² It is interesting to note that Jefferson says that he had waited until 1814 to seriously read Plato, for

he was certainly well-versed in Plato's teachings well before he attempted to read all of the Republic. He told Adams that "while wading thro' the whimsies, [sic] the puerilites, [sic] and unintelligible jargon of this work, I laid it down often to ask myself how it could have been that the world should have so long consented to give reputation to such nonsense as this?"¹⁰³ Jefferson argued that the only reason why Plato had escaped oblivion was due to "the adoption and incorporation of his Whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity."¹⁰⁴

While Jefferson was at least able to understand why the Christians were attracted to Plato, he was at a complete loss as to why the Roman world would have embraced him. He asked Adams, "How could the Roman good sense do it? And particularly how could Cicero bestow such eulogies on Plato?"¹⁰⁵ Jefferson felt that the modern world simply esteemed Plato as a "matter of fashion and authority."¹⁰⁶ The authority he blamed in this case was education, and he argued that educators seem to "have an interest in the reputation and dreams of Plato."¹⁰⁷ Yet, Jefferson reserved his most vitriolic criticism for the authority of the established clergy who had manipulated the writings of Plato to serve their own needs, and in the process, had corrupted the simple teachings of Jesus. Jefferson argued:

The Christian priesthood, findings the doctrine of Christ levelled [sic] 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 it to profit 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 reason that nonsense can never be explained. Their purposes however are answered. Plato is canonized; and it is now deemed as impious to question his merits as those of an Apostle of Jesus.¹⁰⁸

Adams responded to this letter on July 16, 1814, by saying, "I am very glad you have seriously read Plato; and still more rejoiced to find your reflections upon him so perfectly harmonize with mine."¹⁰⁹ Adams continued his letter by telling Jefferson that he had gone through all of Plato's works more than thirty years ago with "the help of two Latin Translations, and one English, and one French Translation,"¹¹⁰ He also said that he compared these translations to the Greek.¹¹¹ Adams described his reaction to Plato by using such words as "disgusted," "disappointed," and "shocked."¹¹² While Jefferson objected most strongly to Plato on religious grounds, Adams' harshest criticism against Plato was based upon political grounds. Adams argued that Plato's idea of men and women living together in a community of shared property was absolutely horrendous. Adams wrote that "nothing can be conceived more destructive of human happiness; more infallibly contrived to transform men and women into brutes, Yahoos, or Daemons than a community of wives and property."¹¹³ Adams went on to say

that he had learned something useful from his reading of Plato, however, and that was "that sneezing is a cure for hickups [sic]. Accordingly I have cured myself and all my friends of that provoking disorder, for thirty years, with a pinch of snuff."¹¹⁴

Adams responded to Jefferson's amazement that Cicero would have bestowed eulogies on Plato by pointing out that:

Cicero was educated in the Groves of Academus where the name of and memory of Plato were idolized to such a degree that if he had wholly renounced the prejudices of his education his reputation would have been lessened, if not injured and ruined.¹¹⁵

As for metaphysics, Adams said he would rather leave the subject in "the clouds with the materialists and the spiritualists"¹¹⁶ But he seemed to understand the appeal that metaphysics holds out to the human mind, for he said that nothing "seizes the attention of the staring animal so surely, as Paradox, Riddle, Mystery, Invention, Discovery, Mystery, Wonder, Temerity."¹¹⁷ Adams considered man's fascination with attempting to understand the mysterious depths of God and the universe as a weakness of human nature.¹¹⁸ It was a weakness, however, that "Plato and his disciples, from the fourth century Christians, to Rousseau and Tom Paine, have been fully sensible of . . . and have too successfully grounded upon it their pretensions to fame."¹¹⁹

By 1815, Adams and Jefferson had reached a full understanding of each other's opinion on Plato and his

impact on Christianity. They shared the sentiment that religion was best understood in a practical sense that could only be judged according to how well an individual conducted his or her life according to the dictates of a clear conscience. Neither Adams nor Jefferson would have inquired into another person's religious faith. Rather than asking if someone believed that Christ had been resurrected, they were more likely to ask about an individual's sense of integrity, honesty, sincerity, morality, and respect for others. In 1817, Adams wrote to Jefferson that "Spirit and matter still remain Riddles." He went on to add, "Vain Man! Mind Your own Business! Do no Wrong! Do all the good You can! Eat Your Canvas back ducks, drink Your burgundy, sleep Your S[i]esta, when necessary, And Trust In God!"¹²⁰

Jefferson and Adams had enough discussions of Plato to enable them to describe a clergyman that they may have approved of by simply saying that he was not a Platonic Christian. On September 3, 1816, Adams wrote to Jefferson and said he wanted Jefferson to meet a Dr. James Freeman. Adams told Jefferson that Freeman was "a Christian, but not a Pythagorian a Platonick [sic] or a Philonic Christian."¹²¹ Their discussion of Plato and the Platonic doctrine of the logos as used by Christians also sheds light upon Jefferson's meaning when he wrote to Adams on April 11, 1823. Jefferson wrote, "I can never join Calvin in addressing his god. He was an Atheist, which I can never

be;"122 Jefferson went on to transcribe the verses that John had written in his Gospel that Christians traditionally transcribed the logos of God, or the Word. Jefferson wrote out the first three verses from the first chapter of John in Greek. He then proceeded to offer his commentary upon what he considered a proper translation.

Jefferson wrote that if John were truly translated, his text would read as follows:

In the beginning God existed, and reason (or mind) was with God, and that mind was God. This was in the beginning with God. All things were created by it, and without it was made not one thing which was made.¹²³

Jefferson went on to present an eloquent argument against the Platonic interpretation of these verses by writing:

. . . this text, so plainly declaring the doctrine of Jesus that the world was created by the supreme, intelligent being, has been perverted by modern Christians to build up a second person of the tritheism by a mistranslation of the word. One of its legitimate meanings indeed is 'a word.' But, in that sense, it makes an unmeaning jargon: while the other meaning 'reason', equally legitimate, explains rationally the eternal preexistence of God, and his creation of the world. Knowing how incomprehensible it was that 'a word' the mere action or articulation of the voice and organs of speech could create a world, they undertake to make of this articulation a second preexisting being, and ascribe to him, and not to God, the creation of the universe. The Atheist here plumes himself on the uselessness of such a God, and the simpler hypothesis of a self-existent universe.¹²⁴

By presenting what he considered a proper translation of the first three verses of the book of John, Jefferson was correcting what he considered a corruption of the doctrine of Jesus. The false doctrine of the Trinity, Jefferson

argued, only led thinking men into rejecting Jesus. As an advocate for religious freedom, however, Jefferson was unconcerned whether or not an individual believed in the Trinity. He had once written that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."¹²⁵ It was as an advocate for the freedom of conscience that Jefferson wrote against the corruption of Christianity, and only the closest of his friends ever knew Jefferson's personal thoughts on religion.

NOTES

¹Julian B. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:xii.

²Ibid.

³Thomas Jefferson to Robert Walsh, April 5, 1823, Ibid., xi.

⁴Lester J. Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 1:xxxii. Cappon counted 380 letters between 1777 and 1817. I counted an additional 70 letters from 1818 to 1826.

⁵For more information on the break in their friendship, see Dumas Malone, The Sage of Monticello (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), 93-105, and Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:265-282. To briefly summarize some of the reasons for the break in their friendship, Jefferson had been upset by Adams' appointment of the "Midnight judges." Adams had been offended by the republican attacks in the press against him, particularly the writing of James Callender. Callender had been arrested under the Sedition law and Jefferson had him acquitted after assuming the presidency. Jefferson's replacement of Federalists in government positions also affected the Adams' family directly. Abigail Adams took it as a personal affront that Jefferson removed her eldest son from his government position. Although Jefferson was unaware that the son of John and Abigail Adams was affected, this seemed to be the final blow to their friendship.

⁶On July 18, 1813, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "I have more to say on religion. For more than sixty years I have been attentive to this great subject. Controversies, between Calvinists and Arminians, Trinitarians and Unitarians, Deists and Christians, Atheists and both, have attracted my attention. . . ." quoted in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:361.

⁷Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1373.

⁸Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 1, 1812, in Cappon, The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:291.

⁹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 3, 1812, *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 10, 1812, *Ibid.*, 297.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 298.

¹²John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 16, 1812, *Ibid.*, 297-98.

¹³Joseph Priestley, A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire (Northumberland, July 1802), vol. 9 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1818), 3.

¹⁴Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 20, 1812, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 298.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁶John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1812, *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, 310.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 29, 1813, *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 326.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1803, in John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 10, 1813, Ibid., 325-26.

³⁰John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 10, 1813, Ibid., 327.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, June 13, 1813, Ibid., 331.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1801, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1085.

³⁷Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, June 15, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:332.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 333.

⁴¹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 25, 1813, Ibid., 334.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1813, Ibid., 338.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 9, 1813, Ibid., 350.

⁴⁸Ibid., 351.

⁴⁹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, October 4, 1813, Ibid., 382.

⁵⁰John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 14, 1813, Ibid., 394.

⁵¹Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1813, Ibid., 359.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1430.

⁵⁴Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:359.

⁵⁵Ibid., 359-60.

⁵⁶John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Ibid., 360.

⁵⁷Dr. Joseph Priestley to Mr. Lindsey, in John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Ibid.

⁵⁸John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Ibid.

⁵⁹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 18, 1813, Ibid., 361.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Dr. Joseph Priestley to Mr. Lindsey, November 4, 1803, in John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 22, 1813, Ibid., 362.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 22, 1813, Ibid., 363.

⁶⁵Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 204.

⁶⁶John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 22, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:363.

⁶⁷Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, Ibid., 367.

⁶⁸Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley, 204.

⁶⁹Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:368.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., 369.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 14, 1813, Ibid., 373.

⁷⁶Ibid., 373.

⁷⁷Joseph Priestley, The History of the Corruptions of Christianity (Birmingham, 1782), vol. 5 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1818), 9.

⁷⁸Ibid., 14.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., Saint Augustine The Confessions, vol. 18 of Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1989), 51.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 52.

⁸⁴Joseph Priestley, The History of the Corruptions of Christianity, 19.

⁸⁵Ibid., 28.

⁸⁶Ibid., 29.

⁸⁷John 1:1 (New American Standard Bible).

⁸⁸Joseph Priestley, An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ (Birmingham: 1786), vol. 7 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1822), 182.

⁸⁹Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:384.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Thomas Jefferson, The Jefferson Bible (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989 reprint from 1801 manuscript), 171.

⁹⁵Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:384.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, December 25, 1813, Ibid., 411.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, Ibid., 432.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 433.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1814,
Ibid., 437.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 439.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 438.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, September 3,
1816, Ibid., 487.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823,
Ibid., 593.

¹²⁴Ibid., 593-94.

¹²⁵Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia,
in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 285.

"I am a Christian, in the only sense
that He [Jesus] wished any one to be."

Thomas Jefferson, 1803

JEFFERSON, PRIESTLEY AND RUSH:
THE CORRESPONDENCE ON SCIENCE,
THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

The development of Jefferson's thoughts about eighteenth century Christianity was directly influenced by Dr. Joseph Priestley. Jefferson's observation that Plato's philosophy had corrupted Christianity was thoroughly substantiated by the writings of Dr. Priestley. The correspondence that Jefferson shared with another friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, revealed the esteem with which Jefferson regarded Priestley's work, as well as their mutual interest in historical Christianity. From 1800 through 1804, Jefferson wrote at least six letters to Dr. Priestley himself, and more than twelve letters to Dr. Rush concerning these subjects.¹ While Jefferson wrote to Priestley and Rush on matters such as education and politics, the subject of Christianity was a central concern on several occasions. It was Priestley's work that provided the basis for the exchanges on the subject of religion. The letters to Priestley and Rush, in addition to Jefferson's reading of

Priestley's theological writings, all serve to illustrate Jefferson's view that eighteenth century Christianity was tainted with Platonic mysticism.

Since Dr. Priestley's historical and theological writings were crucial in the development of Jefferson's argument that Plato's philosophy had corrupted Christianity, it is essential to consider the arguments of Priestley's major works, all of which Jefferson owned.² These included The History of the Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, (1736); The History of the Corruptions of Christianity, (1793); Socrates and Jesus Compared, (1803); and The Doctrines of Heathenism and Revelation Compared, (1804). The centrality of Plato in these writings is well-illustrated by the chapters in the Early Opinions, such as "Of the Doctrine of Plato Concerning God, and the General System of Nature," and "A View of the Principles of the Later Platonists," as well as "Of the Platonism of Philo." One section was simply called "Of Christian Platonism."³

In establishing the importance of Priestley's work to Jefferson, it seems worthwhile to return briefly to a letter Jefferson wrote to John Adams on August 22, 1813. In it, Jefferson said of Priestley, ". . . I have read his Corruptions of Christianity, and Early Opinions of Jesus, over and over again; and I rest on them, and on Middleton's writings, . . . as the basis of my own faith."⁴ Jefferson appears, however, to have placed a greater emphasis upon the

work of Priestley than he did on that of Middleton. Even though both were influential, Jefferson chose the writings of Priestley to recommend to his own family. On April 23, 1803, Jefferson wrote to his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, and informed her that "I have written to Philadelphia for Doctr [sic] Priestley's history of the corruptions of Christianity, which I will send you, and recommend to you an attentive perusal, because it establishes the groundwork of my view of this subject."⁵

It is interesting to note that Jefferson's friends were primarily men of science and politics. Dr. Priestley made his reputation as a scientist by the publication of the History of Electricity, and, in 1772, An Account of the Discoveries Relating to Vision, Light and Colors. Benjamin Franklin purchased twenty copies of An Account of the Discoveries.⁶ Perhaps Priestley's greatest scientific achievement was the discovery of oxygen. But, as Ira V. Brown observed, with over twenty volumes of theological writings, Priestley's "energies were devoted primarily to religion, not to science."⁷

Priestley's theological work provided an understanding of Plato's philosophy which enabled Jefferson to criticize Plato without going too far into the complex turns of metaphysical discussions. Jefferson's understanding of Plato was based upon Priestley's research. Priestley explained the complexities of Plato's metaphysics

thoroughly, and Jefferson was content to rest upon Priestley's analysis. It should be noted that when Jefferson informed John Adams that he had read Priestley's Corruptions of Christianity as well as Early Opinions of Jesus, he also told Adams that "I cling to their [Priestley's and Middleton's] learning, so much superior to my own."⁸

Priestley traced the Platonic roots of the corruption of Christianity from the first to the fourth century A.D. He argued that "the more philosophical" of the later Christians were embarrassed by a religion that was based upon a crucified man. This observation led Priestley to conclude that ". . . they [the philosophical Christians] began to raise the dignity of the person of Christ, that it might appear less disgraceful to be ranked amongst his disciples."⁹ The observation that "the more learned Jews had a recourse to an allegorical method of interpreting what they found to be most objected to in their sacred writings" led Priestley to further argue that "by this means [they] pretended to find in the books of Moses, and the prophets all the great principles of Greek philosophy, and especially that of Plato, which at that time was most in vogue."¹⁰ The elements of Platonic thought that Priestley found in the philosophical Christians and the learned Jews were later partially attributed to, according to Priestley, the writings of Origen and Clemens

Alexandrinus. Priestley argued that both of these men "believed the pre-existence of souls, and other distinguishing tenets of Platonism"11

Priestley's observations are confirmed by more recent scholars. In 1950, Frederick Coppleston, S.J., wrote the second volume of his A History of Philosophy, and he observed that:

Origen was the most prolific and learned of all Christian writers before the Council of Nicaea, and there is no doubt that he had every intention of being and remaining an orthodox Christian; but his desire to reconcile the Platonic philosophy with Christianity and his enthusiasm for the allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures led him into some heterodox opinions.¹²

While arguing against the orthodox doctrine of the existence of hell, Origen continued to argue that Christ was divine.¹³ One of the leading ideas that supported the arguments that Christ was divine was based upon the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul. This idea appealed to Origen and Coppleston affirmed that "the theory of pre-existence is Platonic."¹⁴

Priestley pointed out that in the first centuries of Christianity, "All the early Fathers speak of Christ as not having existed always, except as reason exists in man"15 Once the idea of the existence of reason became identified with Christ, or rather the pre-existence of reason became identified with the logos-as-Christ, the philosophical groundwork was established for the deification of Christ as the word of God made flesh. From this

argument, the question of Christ's eternal pre-existence was interwoven with the Godhead, so that both were seen to share the same attributes. Priestley observed that ". . . the Platonists in general thought that the creation was from eternity, there never having been any time in which the Divine Being did not act."¹⁶ From this point of view, the philosophical Christians could conclude that Christ was, and always had been, a part of the actions of God.

Priestley considered the doctrine of Christ's divinity to be a Platonic relapse into polytheism.¹⁷ He argued that this doctrine was not part of the history of Christianity until the Christian Platonist, Justin Martyr, "advanced the doctrine of the divinity of Christ,"¹⁸ To substantiate his argument, after identifying a Christian author, Clemens Romanus, a contemporary of Paul, Priestley pointed out that "Clemens Romanus never calls Christ God." He further quotes Clemens Romanus as saying, "have we not all one God, and one Christ and one spirit of grace poured upon us all?" This, Priestley concluded, "is exactly the language of the apostle Paul,"¹⁹

One of Priestley's strongest arguments against the doctrine of the deification of Christ was based upon simply observing the manner in which the early Christians used language in reference to Jesus. After all, if the Apostle Paul never called Christ God, how was it that later Christians would? Priestley pointed out that the doctrine

of Christ's divinity was not easily accepted among the "unlearned Christians." He further asserted that the "early unlearned Christians" thought that the deification of Christ "savoured of polytheism, [and] that it was introduced by those who had philosophical education,"20

Priestley's understanding of this problem is confirmed by a more recent scholar. In 1948, A. H. M. Jones pointed out that:

Origen's Christian Platonism had carried the church by storm, and for a while pupils of his school had dominated Christian thought, but even Origen himself had been viewed with suspicion by simple believers, and his successors had drifted yet further from the faith of the common man in the pursuit of their philosophical speculations:21

As an example of how a Platonic Christian, such as Origen, would attempt to explain how a simple believer should be made to understand that Christ was divine, Priestley provided the following commentary on Origen. According to Priestley, Origen argued that, "We must tell them, that he who is of himself God, (θεος), is that God (God with the article), (Ο θεος),--but rather that whatsoever [is] besides that self existent person" is "rather a divine person, is God without the article (θεος)."22 Priestley pointed out that such an explanation was hardly satisfactory to the "unlearned Christians."23 It was also the sort of Platonic argument that Jefferson would reject as ". . . mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind."24

Jefferson was certainly aware of the various Christian authors to whom Priestley referred. Jefferson owned a volume of the first century Christian apologist Justin Martyr.²⁵ Jefferson's library also contained three works by Origen and two by Clement of Alexandria.²⁶ Jefferson had 271 titles that he classified under religion.²⁷ In addition to this, Jefferson owned twenty-five titles that were classified under 'ecclesiastical history.'²⁸

The influence that Priestley had upon Jefferson is clear. Priestley provided Jefferson with an insight into how Plato's philosophy had affected the doctrines of Christianity. Priestley asserted:

The divinity of Christ was first advanced and urged by those who had been heathen philosophers, and especially those who were the admirers of Plato, who held the opinion of a second God. Austin says that he considered Christ as no other than a most excellent man, and had no suspicion of the word of God being incarnate in him, or how "the Catholic faith differed from the error of Photinus," (the last of the proper Unitarians whose name is come down to us,) "till he read the books of Plato; and that he was afterwards confirmed in his opinions by reading the Scriptures. Constantine, in his orations to the Council of Nice, speaks with commendation of Plato, as having taught the doctrine of "a second God, derived from the supreme God, and subservient to his will."²⁹

In this single paragraph, Priestley traced the corruption of Christianity from the philosophy of Plato to the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.

Both Jefferson and Priestley rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine was worked out at the Council

of Nicea in 325 A.D., and as such this date must stand as marking one of the most crucial events in the history of western civilization. In An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Priestley traced the beginnings of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity to the Council of Niceae, and he concluded that "the proper source of it was the philosophy of Plato."³⁰

According to the Nicene creed that was adopted in 325 A.D., Jesus Christ was, as Priestley observed, considered to be "the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all Worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father,"³¹ Once this view of Christ began to overshadow all others, the groundwork for the doctrine of the Trinity was established. Priestley questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, and argued that it "may justly be called the greatest of all corruptions of Christianity, as it infringes upon . . . the unity of God, in the person of the Supreme Father."³² And he further pointed out that it "was the work of Platonic philosophers,"³³

In his discussion of the Platonic elements that had corrupted Christianity, Priestley carefully noted that the early church Fathers were responsible for using Plato improperly. The source for the doctrine of the Trinity

evolved out of the teachings of Plato. Priestley pointed out:

The doctrines of the personification of the logos, or the divine intellect, consisting of the attributes of wisdom, power, & c. was certainly introduced by the Platonists, and from them it was adopted by the Christian fathers; but it appears to me, from a pretty careful examination of the writings of Plato, that it was not done by himself, though the confusion of his ideas gave occasion to it in his followers.³⁴

Since the personification of the logos was not a part of Plato's original intention, Priestley argued that the philosophical Christians had grafted the metaphysics of Plato onto the Christian religion, and this misuse of Plato further led to the corruption of the teachings of Jesus.

Since the philosophical Christians had such a deep appreciation for the philosophy of Plato, Priestley examined some of the aspects of Plato's teachings that were attractive to Christians such as Origen. He argued that the "things which struck the Christians in Platonism were the doctrines of one God, a being of perfect goodness, that of his universal providence, that of the soul, and its immortality, . . . the improvement of the mind consisting in its resemblance to God, and a kind of union with him."³⁵ Priestley went on to observe that the study of Plato was considered to be the "best preparation for the study of Christianity."³⁶

One of the key points in establishing the divinity of Christ in the Trinity was the personification of the logos as Christ. Priestley examined Plato's philosophy on the logos and argued that "According to Plato, logos has only two acceptations, viz. those of speech, and of reason, such as is found in man."³⁷ The Christian Fathers, however, used the argument that logos as reason could be understood as the wisdom of God made flesh in the person of Christ. Priestley asserted that he could find no evidence that Plato had ever personified the logos.³⁸ Plato did, however, supply the early Christian Fathers with a language and a philosophy which enabled them to discuss doctrines of divinity and the pre-existence of souls. Priestley pointed out that the "things to which there is the greatest appearance of Plato giving a permanent existence, as original principles of things, are the ideas in the divine mind, from which was formed the exemplar or pattern of the visible world."³⁹ While the Platonic theory of ideas was the sort of philosophy that the philosophical Christians would find useful, it was precisely this sort of reasoning that Priestley observed to be a corrupting influence upon the Christian religion.

Just as the philosophical Christians had bestowed the personal identification of the logos upon Christ, Priestley observed that they proceeded to do the same thing with the idea of the Holy Spirit. He points out that the

doctrine of the Trinity was completed once the Holy Spirit was also equated as being part of God and Christ. Priestley argued:

. . . those who had distinguished themselves the most by their defence [sic] of the doctrine of consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, did likewise maintain both the proper personality of the Spirit, and also his consubstantiality with the Father and the Son. This doctrine of the consubstantiality of the three Divine persons soon led to that of their perfect equality with respect to all divine perfections; and this completed the whole scheme. According to it, though there is but one God, there are three divine persons, each of which, separately taken, is perfect God, though all together make no more than one perfect God; a proposition not only repugnant to the plainest principles of common sense, but altogether unknown before the Council of Nice, as is acknowledged by many learned Trinitarians.⁴⁰

Priestley was adamant in his rejection of the Trinity as "the greatest of all corruptions of Christianity," and he was determined to demonstrate that it "was the work of Platonic philosophers,"⁴¹ But since the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., Priestley suggested that "A little reflection, however, one would think, might satisfy any thinking person, that a doctrine which was unknown in the Christian Church till the fourth century, could be no genuine doctrine of Christianity."⁴²

Jefferson certainly shared Priestley's opinion on the subject of the Christian Trinity. On August 22, 1813, Jefferson wrote to John Adams and asserted that "It is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticism that three are one and one is

three;"43 Not only did Jefferson share in Priestley's rejection of the Trinity as a corruption of the Christian religion, but Jefferson also accepted Priestley's argument that the source of the corruption was "Platonic mysticism." Jefferson thought that the Unitarian religion would eventually replace "Platonic Christianity" and he often expressed the hope that a simpler form of Christianity would eventually spread across the United States. Jefferson argued:

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. The Eastern presses are giving us many excellent pieces on the subject, and Priestley's learned writings on it are, or should be in every hand. In fact the Athanasian paradox that one is three, and three but one is so incomprehensible to the human mind that no candid man can say he has any idea of it, and how can he believe what presents no idea. He who thinks he does only deceives himself.⁴⁴

It is interesting that, while Jefferson read Priestley's writings "over and over again,"⁴⁵ he himself reflected little personal interest in writing in a theological style. Jefferson was not a theologian and he had little use for the mystical arguments of theologians. Jefferson told John Adams that when "I meet with a proposition beyond finite comprehension, I abandon it as I do a weight which human strength can not lift: and I think ignorance, in these cases, is truly the softest pillow on which I can lay my head."⁴⁶ To speak in theological terms

of the pre-existence of the soul, the logos, or consubstantiation, was to introduce philosophical jargon into Christianity in place of the simple humanity of Christ. On the occasions when he ventured into a discussion of metaphysics, as Charles Sanford observed, "Jefferson likewise agreed with Priestley's scientific approach to man and his world and adopted his argument that man was composed of matter, not spirit, as Plato and later theologians argued."⁴⁷

This approach is illustrated in a letter that Jefferson wrote to John Adams on August 15, 1820, in response to a series of questions that Adams had posed for Jefferson in a previous letter that Jefferson described as "a puzzling letter . . . on matter, spirit, motion, etc."⁴⁸ Jefferson shared his thoughts with Adams about the metaphysical questions regarding matter and spirit by arguing:

I can conceive [sic] thought to be an action of a particular organisation [sic] of matter, formed for that purpose by it's [sic] creator, as well as that attraction is an action of matter, or magnetism of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called thinking shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called attraction, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialists may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to

say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul.⁴⁹

In his argument, Jefferson stressed the necessity of observing and sensing reality, as opposed to the Platonic notion that real objects were merely representations of an abstract divine idea.⁵⁰ Jefferson was aware of the Platonic doctrine of the Forms, and it was the sort of thing which he would reject as one of the "foggy dreams of Plato."⁵¹

Jefferson also attacked the notion that God, or the human soul, was immaterial. He asserted that "At what age of the Christian church this heresy of immaterialism, this masked atheism, crept in, I do not know. But heresy it certainly is. Jesus taught nothing of it."⁵² In what seems to be an excellent tactical move to further his argument, Jefferson quoted from the early church fathers who were considered to be Platonic theologians, in order to demonstrate their own inconsistencies vis-a-vis the issue of materialism versus immaterialism. Jefferson pointed out that Origen said, "God is in very fact corporeal, but, by reason of so much heavier bodies, incorporeal."⁵³ Jefferson also quoted Justin Martyr, who said, "we say that the divinity is without body, not because it is bodiless, but since the state of not being bounded by anything is a more honorable one than that of being bounded, for this reason we call him bodiless."⁵⁴ Jefferson quickly tired of these metaphysical speculations, and he told Adams that "I am

satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence."⁵⁵ In this, Jefferson was content to "recur to my habitual anodyne, 'I feel: therefore I exist.'"⁵⁶

Jefferson did not agree with Priestley in all of his religious opinions. Dr. Priestley believed in the resurrection of Christ and most of the miracles of the New Testament, but he rejected the Virgin birth as a false doctrine.⁵⁷ While Jefferson also rejected the Virgin birth, there is no record of Jefferson and Priestley discussing their differences of opinion concerning miracles and the resurrection. In examining Jefferson's thoughts upon miracles and the resurrection, it seems worthwhile to briefly return to a letter that Jefferson wrote to William Short on October 31, 1819. In this letter, Jefferson said that he hoped that the doctrines of Jesus would be rescued "from the imputation of imposture, which has resulted from misconstructions of his words by his pretended votaries,"⁵⁸ After Jefferson sent this letter to Short, he added some aspects of the "artificial systems" that he hoped to see removed from the Christian system. These additions were made on Jefferson's personal copy, so that Short probably never read them. Jefferson's list of these false doctrines were:

. . . the immaculate conception of Jesus, his deification, the creation of the world by him, his miraculous powers, his resurrection and visible ascension, his corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, orders of Hierarchy, & [et]c.⁵⁹

The differences between Jefferson and Priestley on questions regarding the resurrection or miracles would have mattered little to Jefferson. The most vital aspect of Jefferson's attitude towards all religious questions was centered upon the issue of whether or not individuals had the freedom to reason for themselves. The importance of using reason to freely contemplate religious issues was paramount to Jefferson, and it was the heart of his Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia. Actually, it would have been uncharacteristic of Jefferson to have engaged Priestley concerning their differences of opinion. Jefferson's attitude regarding religious controversy was described by his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, who wrote:

Of his particular religious opinions, his family knew no more than the world. If asked by one of them, his opinion on any religious subject, his uniform reply was, that it was a subject each was bound to study assiduously for himself, unbiased by the opinions of others--it was a matter solely of conscience; after thorough investigation, they were responsible for the righteousness, but not the rightfulness of their opinions; that the expression of his opinion might influence theirs, and he would not give it!⁶⁰

This description fits Jefferson when it comes to matters involving his family and friends, or the public in general. When it came to the clergymen who had corrupted Christianity, however, that was a different issue.

Jefferson's grandson acknowledged that Jefferson had "seen and read much of the abuses of Christianity;" and he added that "he abhorred those abuses and their authors, and denounced them without reserve."⁶¹

One of the interesting abuses of Christianity that Priestley pointed out was based on the argument that Plato's philosophy had eliminated the role of reason in understanding the Christian religion. Priestley observed that the heathen philosophers understood their own metaphysics, and that a mystery did not imply something that could not be understood. Priestley argued that, "Everything, indeed, in that age, was called a mystery that was reputed sacred, . . . but the idea of unintelligible, or inexplicable, was not then affixed to the word mystery."⁶² The very notion that an individual should surrender reason upon the altar of religion was anathema to Jefferson, for the spirit of free inquiry lived in his correspondence.

On April 9, 1803, Jefferson wrote to Dr. Priestley to thank him for sending the pamphlet of "Socrates and Jesus."⁶³ Jefferson told Priestley, "I avail myself of the first moment of leisure after my return to acknowledge [sic] the pleasure I had in the perusal of it, and the desire it excited to see you take up the subject on a more extensive scale."⁶⁴ Jefferson went on to provide Priestley with a brief summary of his own ideas for a syllabus, stating that he ". . . would purposely omit the question of his [Jesus']

divinity and even of his inspiration. To do him justice, it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter,"65 This letter would later be published without Jefferson's knowledge or approval. In fact, John Adams would discover it in Lindsey's Memoirs, and Adams ended up quoting rather extensively from it when he wrote to Jefferson on July 16, 1813, as already discussed in part three.⁶⁶

Jefferson returned to the subject of Christianity in his next letter to Dr. Priestley. On April 24, 1803, Jefferson sent Priestley a copy of the syllabus he had written, entitled Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared With Those of Others. In addition to sending a copy of his syllabus to Dr. Priestley, Jefferson also sent a copy to Dr. Benjamin Rush. On April 21, 1803, Jefferson wrote to Dr. Rush, informing him that:

I received from Doctr. Priestley his little treatise of 'Socrates and Jesus compared.' This being a section of the general views I had taken of the field, it became a subject of reflection, while on the road, and unoccupied otherwise. The result was, to arrange in my mind a Syllabus, or Outline, of such an Estimate of the comparative merits of Christianity, as I wished to see executed, by some one of more leisure and information for the task than myself.⁶⁷

While Jefferson acknowledged his debt to Dr. Priestley for providing the impetus which led him to write his own syllabus, Jefferson clearly considered Priestley to be better qualified for pursuing the subject in more depth. On April 9, 1803, Jefferson wrote Priestley and encouraged him

to expand his writings based upon the pamphlet Socrates and Jesus Compared. Jefferson told Priestley that "You are the person who of all others would do it best, and most promptly. You have all the materials at hand, and you put together with ease. I wish you could be induced to extend your late work to the whole subject."⁶⁸ Jefferson wanted Priestley to extend his subject so as to compare the Christian religion more thoroughly with other ancient philosophies, and he would in fact get his wish for, due to Jefferson's persistence, Priestley wrote The Doctrines of Heathenism and Revelation Compared.⁶⁹

Jefferson acknowledged that Priestley might disagree with him in regard to his opinion of Christianity, and he informed Priestley that "there is a point or two in which you and I probably differ, but the wonder would be that any two persons should see in the same point of view all the parts of an extensive subject."⁷⁰ With this brief warning, Jefferson sent Priestley his syllabus. Since Jefferson's syllabus is an important key as to his thoughts about eighteenth century Christianity, it seems worthwhile to include it in its complete form. This document reveals the manner in which Jefferson approached the doctrines of Jesus without introducing any of the mysticism which he argued was characteristic of the teachings of Plato. In April of 1803, Jefferson wrote:

SYLLABUS OF AN ESTIMATE OF THE MERIT OF THE DOCTRINES OF JESUS, COMPARED WITH THOSE OF OTHERS

In a comparative view of the Ethics of the enlightened nations of antiquity, of the Jews and of Jesus, no notice should be taken of the corruptions of reason among the ancients, to wit, the idolatry & superstition of the vulgar, nor of the corruptions of Christianity by the learned among its professors.

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. I. Their precepts related chiefly to ourselves, and the government of those passions which, unrestrained, would disturb our tranquillity 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, 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.

II. JEWS. I. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief of one only God. But their ideas of him & of his attributes were degrading and 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 & antisocial, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation, therefore, in an eminent degree.

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 Arrian 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 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 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 imposter.

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 that has ever been taught by man.

The question of his being a member of the Godhead, 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 [God] head will evince the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others.

3. The precepts of philosophy, & how 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.⁷¹

Within these two pages, Jefferson summarized his entire view of the Christian religion. It is significant that in his comparison of the teachings of Socrates and those of Jesus, Jefferson failed to acknowledge Plato as a reliable source for Socrates. In other copies of this syllabus, Jefferson wrote, "I name not Plato, who only used the name of Socrates to cover the whimsies of his own brain," after listing Xenophon as a source for reading Socrates.⁷² Jefferson also argued in his syllabus that the "Grecian sophist" was the source of "mysticism" which led the "schismatising followers" of Jesus to pervert "the simple doctrines he taught."⁷³ Jefferson concluded that this corruption of the teachings of Jesus led "good men" to view Jesus as "an imposter."⁷⁴ Another key point in Jefferson's syllabus was the importance of divorcing any questions regarding the divinity of Jesus from the importance of the doctrine which he taught. Jefferson accepted the doctrine of "a future state," but he did not want to introduce the "question of his being a member of the Godhead."⁷⁵

On May 7, 1803, Dr. Priestley wrote back to Jefferson and thanked him for sending a copy of the syllabus. Priestley acknowledged that there were some differences of opinion between him and Jefferson. Priestley disagreed with Jefferson on the idea that "Jesus never laid claim to a divine mission."⁷⁶ Priestley seems to have misunderstood Jefferson on this point, however, because Jefferson argued that any issue regarding the divinity of Jesus was to be ignored. Priestley proceeded to question Jefferson as to "How come so many persons, hundreds in the first instance, and thousands presently after, to believe that Jesus did pretend to a divine mission, and to be satisfied by some means or other, that his pretensions were well founded."⁷⁷ Priestley did not go on to suggest that Jesus was divine, however, for he seemed content to simply argue that the mission was divine.

Another point that Priestley raised with Jefferson concerned the Apostle Paul. Priestley informed Jefferson that "With respect to natural ability, or advantage of any other kind, the apostles, at least Paul, were upon a level with Jesus; and yet they all submitted to him as their leader, and as much as after he was dead, as while he was living."⁷⁸ Jefferson certainly did not share Priestley's high opinion of Paul. It was characteristic of Jefferson not to point out areas of disagreement between himself and another in a confrontation. Jefferson's opinion of the

Apostle Paul can be seen in another letter that he wrote to William Short on April 13, 1820. In a general condemnation of the early philosophical Christians, Jefferson argued, "Of this band of dupes and imposters, Paul was the greatest coryphaeus, and first of the corrupters of the doctrines of Jesus."⁷⁹ If Jefferson felt this way about Paul in 1803, he never shared his thoughts with Priestley. After Priestley raised these various points of possible disagreement with Jefferson, he concluded his letter in an apologetic tone, saying, "I ask pardon for writing in this manner, and by no means wish to draw you into a controversy, or a correspondence on the subject; but suggest the hints for your private consideration."⁸⁰ There is no record of Jefferson engaging Priestley in any further discussions on these issues.

In the pamphlet Socrates and Jesus Compared, Priestley argued that Socrates was misrepresented by Plato on issues relating to metaphysical or religious ideas. When it came to questions regarding the historical character of Socrates, however, Priestley found no reason to doubt the accuracy of Plato's accounts, at least as long as Plato was corroborated by Xenophon. Priestley acknowledged that Plato was a great writer by observing that:

If we may depend upon what is transmitted to us concerning him [Socrates] by Xenophon and Plato, who were his contemporaries and disciples, both men of eminence, (and there were no writers in the Heathen

world whose characters stand higher than theirs,) he was a very extraordinary man with respect to wisdom and virtue.⁸¹

Jefferson would not begrudge Plato the merit he deserved as an eloquent author. In his Autobiography, Jefferson observed that the conversation of Marquis de la Fayette and several of his associates was ". . . truly worthy of being placed in parallel with the finest dialogues of antiquity, as handed to us by Xenophon, by Plato and Cicero."⁸² In this case, Jefferson can be seen appreciating Plato, but only in the classical context in which he belongs. Jefferson valued Plato as an ancient author who wrote with style and eloquence, but he rejected the syncretism of Platonic thought with Christianity as a corruption of historical principles.

Jefferson's respect for evaluating events in their own historical framework can be seen in his argument that no notice should be taken of the idolatry of the ancient philosophers.⁸³ This would enable Jefferson to evaluate the teachings of the ancient authors as well as the teachings of Jesus on their own historical terms. Dr. Priestley, on the other hand, argued that Socrates was inferior to Jesus because he was an idolater.⁸⁴ As he made his comparisons between Socrates and Jesus, Dr. Priestley relied heavily upon Xenophon whereas Plato was relegated to a minor role in providing historical support for the character of Socrates. From Xenophon's Memorabilia, Priestley quoted Socrates as

saying, "Do I not believe, . . . that the sun, and the moon, are gods as well as others?"⁸⁵

Priestley strove to demonstrate that, even though Socrates had a better understanding "concerning the nature and character of Deity, and also of virtue, than the generality of his countrymen, and even of the philosophers," Socrates was still inferior to Jesus in the comprehension "concerning the great sanction of virtue, in the doctrine of the future state."⁸⁶ Jefferson noted that Jesus taught "emphatically, the doctrine of a future state,"⁸⁷ yet Priestley argued that such a doctrine was foreign to Socrates, and that Plato was responsible for misrepresenting Socrates on this point.⁸⁸ Priestley argued that Plato was the only source to substantiate the claim that Socrates believed in a future state, because Xenophon never alluded to it in his writings. Since Plato was the only source to suggest that Socrates believed in a future state, Priestley rejected the whole idea, and he went on to argue that ". . . it is well known that Plato did not scruple to put into the mouth of Socrates, language and sentiments that never fell from him"⁸⁹ This observation was similar to one of Jefferson's criticisms of Plato, as when Jefferson complained that ". . . Plato puts in his [Socrates] mouth such paralogisms, such quibbles on words, and sophisms, as a school boy would be ashamed of,"⁹⁰

Priestley further argued that much of the mysticism in Christianity was a result of Plato's teachings. This idea was central in Jefferson's criticism of what he considered Platonic Christianity. Priestley observed that "the idea of a mystical union with God, and a consequent intimate communication with him, came into Christianity from the later Platonists."⁹¹ The implication of this argument is that Christianity had adopted a doctrine that was damaging to those who believed it. By offering the followers of such a doctrine an intimate, mystical, personal communication with God, the Platonic clergy had promised the common believer an emotional, spiritual experience that was not a part of this world, nor was it a part of the original teachings of Jesus.

Priestley also examined the arguments for the "Proof of a future state as Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates"⁹² But, he concluded that Plato's arguments from the Republic are "more like the mere play of imagination, than the deductions of reason."⁹³ Priestley summarized Plato's arguments by writing:

His first argument is, that as everything else in nature has its contrary, death must have it also, and if so, it must be followed by life, as day follows night, and a state of vigilance always follows sleep. But might it be said that, for the same reason, every thing that is bitter must, sometime or other, become sweet, and every thing that is sweet become bitter. His second argument is, that all our present acquired knowledge is only the recollection of what we knew in a former state. But what evidence is there of this? His third argument is,

that only compound substances are liable to corruption, by a separation of the parts of which they consist; but the mind is a simple substance, and therefore cannot be affected by the dissolution of the body in death.⁹⁴

The argument that Priestley found the most compelling was the third one, but he also observed that "it is of too subtle a nature to give much satisfaction."⁹⁵ None of these three arguments for the existence of a "future state" was strong enough to convince Priestley that Socrates believed them, and he went on to ask, "Are these sufficient arguments for a man at the point of death to build his faith and hope upon?"⁹⁶

Jefferson also made note of Plato's arguments in favor of the continued existence of the soul. In a letter to John Adams on July 5, 1814, Jefferson observed that Plato "is particularly appealed to as an advocate of the immortality of the soul; and yet I will venture to say that were there no better arguments for it than his proof of it, not a man in the world would believe it."⁹⁷ Jefferson did not elaborate on Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, nor did he briefly list any of Plato's arguments as Priestley had done, because Priestley had already formed a background of observations which freed Jefferson from laboriously summarizing metaphysical arguments that he rejected. The knowledge of the ancient authors and their arguments were already assumed to be understood by Jefferson's correspondents.

While Jefferson wrote to John Adams at length on Plato, Priestley, and religion as illustrated in part three, Jefferson's reflections on Priestley and his views also emerge in Jefferson's correspondence with another scientist, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Benjamin Rush distinguished himself with a long career as a physician in Philadelphia. He served as the physician general to Washington's Continental Army during the American revolution. Prior to the revolution, Rush had served as a chemistry professor at the college of Philadelphia, and he was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence.⁹⁸

The high regard and warm affection that Dr. Rush felt towards Jefferson is evident in Rush's Autobiography. In 1800, Dr. Rush began to record his life story for the benefit of his family, saying that "I have concluded to put upon paper a few incidents that may perhaps afford entertainment and instruction to them [my family] when I am no more."⁹⁹ Since his Autobiography was never intended for publication, there is a candid yet flattering tone in Rush's comments in regard to Jefferson. Rush wrote about Jefferson and observed that:

He possessed a genius of the first order. It was universal in its objects. He was not less distinguished for his political, than his mathematical and philosophical knowledge. The objects of his benevolence were as extensive as those of his knowledge. He was not only the friend of his country, but of all nations and religions.¹⁰⁰

Rush went on to express a sense of curiosity about Jefferson's thoughts on religion. Rush wrote:

He [Jefferson] was said . . . to be unfriendly to Christianity. It is possible this may be true. His notes contain some expressions which favor that opinion. In my conversation with him in Philadelphia while he was Vice President he denied the charge, and said he believed in the divine mission of the Savior of the World, but he did not believe that he was the Son of God in the way in which many Christians believed it. He said he believed further in the divine institution of the Sabbath, which he conceived to be a great blessing to the world, more especially to poor people and slaves. He believed likewise in the resurrection, and a future state of rewards and punishments.¹⁰¹

While Rush's assertion that Jefferson believed in the resurrection is a tenuous argument at best, Jefferson certainly believed in an afterlife and Rush may have equated this to mean the same thing. Rush did capture in his comments on Jefferson the sense that Jefferson accepted the divinity of the mission of Jesus, while rejecting the idea that Jesus was personally divine.

On August 22, 1800, Dr. Rush wrote to Jefferson and requested that he share his religious creed with him.¹⁰² Rush reminded Jefferson that he had previously promised to share his views on religion with him, and he went on to offer his own opinion that Christianity was the best religion for a republican form of government. Rush observed that:

I have always considered Christianity as the strong ground of Republicanism. Its Spirit is opposed, not only to the splendor, but even to the very forms of monarchy, and many of its precepts have for their Objects, republican liberty and equality, as well as

simplicity, integrity and Economy in government. It is only necessary for Republicanism to ally itself to the christian [sic] Religion, to overturn all the corrupted political and religious institutions in the world.¹⁰³

This letter was more than a simple affirmation of the Christian faith from one friend to another; rather, it was an argument for an alliance between church and state addressed to the next president of the United States. Rush may have been hoping that Jefferson could somehow use Christianity to defeat the Federalists in the election of 1800, because he argued that the Christian religion opposed monarchy and they, the Jefferson republicans, had accused the Federalists of favoring the monarchy of England. However, Rush must have been aware of Jefferson's lifelong opposition to any religion establishing itself within the government. Had Jefferson accepted Rush's argument, he would have, in essence, been forced to refute his authorship of Virginia's Bill for Religious Freedom.

Jefferson responded to Dr. Rush on September 23, 1800, and he ignored Rush's warm admiration for the idea that a republican government was best served by allying itself with the Christian religion. Jefferson informed Rush that he had not forgotten to send him his views on the Christian religion, but, "On the contrary, it is because I have reflected on it, that I find much more time necessary for it, than I can at present dispose of."¹⁰⁴ The pressures of a national election for the presidency may have prevented

Jefferson from having adequate time to compile his views succinctly for Rush. In the election of 1800, the Federalists attempted to discredit Jefferson by labeling him a Jacobin, a demagogue, as well as an infidel.¹⁰⁵ An example of the sort of political attacks that Jefferson was exposed to can be seen in a pamphlet that was circulated as "A Short Address to the Voters of Delaware." In this pamphlet, the anonymous author who simply signed his name as "A Christian Federalist," argued:

Can serious and reflecting men look about them and doubt, that if Jefferson is elected, and the Jacobins get into authority, that those morals which protect our wives and daughters from seduction and violence--defend our property from plunder and devastation, and shield our religion from contempt and profanation, will not be trampled upon and exploded.¹⁰⁶

In the letter that Jefferson wrote to Rush on September 23, 1800, he referred to the religious attacks that had been directed against him, and Jefferson concluded that the reason he was being attacked upon religious grounds was due to his opposition to any religion establishing its own "particular form of Christianity thro' the U.S."¹⁰⁷ Jefferson went on to argue that the Episcopalians and the Congregationalists were particularly inclined towards attempting to institute their creed throughout the United States. After he pointed this out, Jefferson proceeded to write one of his most eloquent expressions as an advocate for religious freedom. Jefferson informed Rush that ". . . they [the Episcopalians and the Congregationalists] believed

that any portion of power confided to me, will be extended in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."¹⁰⁸

These words would eventually be edited and immortalized in stone in the Jefferson Memorial, but it is worth noting that the tyranny Jefferson directly opposed in 1800 was that which was represented by orthodox Christianity which had been tainted with Platonic mysticism. On October 6, 1800, Rush wrote back to Jefferson without commenting on any particular sect or their beliefs. Rush simply affirmed Jefferson's opinion that church and state should be kept separate. Rush told Jefferson, "I agree with you likewise in your wishes to keep religion and government independent of each other."¹⁰⁹

Jefferson returned to the subject of religion in a letter to Rush on April 21, 1803. This letter was significant because Jefferson included his Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared with Those of Others. Jefferson explained how he finally came to write his syllabus by informing Rush that:

I received from Doctr. Priestley, his little treatise of Socrates and Jesus Compared. This being a section of the general view I had taken of the field it became a subject of reflection while on the road, . . . The result was to arrange in my mind a syllabus, an outline of such estimate of the comparative merits of Christianity, . . .¹¹⁰

This was the same syllabus that Jefferson also sent to Dr. Priestley, and some of the similarities and differences which existed between Priestley's Socrates and Jesus and Jefferson's Syllabus have been noted. Moreover, Jefferson assured Rush that his Syllabus was "the result of a life of inquiry and reflection, and very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my faith."¹¹¹ Jefferson defended himself against the charges that he was not a Christian by arguing

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 that he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; & believing he never claimed any other.¹¹²

Jefferson assured Rush that he trusted him to keep the syllabus a secret. Since Rush was one of the few people with whom Jefferson shared his Syllabus, Jefferson had complete confidence that he could confide in Rush and he affirmed that "I know that it [the syllabus] will not be exposed to the malignant perversions of those who make every word from me a test for new representations & calumnies."¹¹³ In a classic statement as an advocate for religious freedom, Jefferson also argued that:

It behoves [sic] every man who values liberty of conscience for himself, to resist invasions of it in the case of others; . . . 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.¹¹⁴

The importance of religious freedom was paramount in Jefferson's position regarding Christianity, and the tendency to proselytize and inquire into another's religious faith was adamantly opposed by Jefferson. Jefferson was not being inconsistent by arguing that no man should answer "questions of faith" while at the same time sending out copies of his syllabus to Rush and Priestley, because Jefferson's emphasis was placed on discovering the historical Jesus, as opposed to the Jesus who he argued had been created by the Platonizing Christians.

On May 7, 1803, Dr. Rush wrote to Jefferson and informed him that:

I have read your Creed with great attention, and was much pleased to find you are by no means so heterodox as you have been supposed to be by your enemies. I do not think with you in your account of the character and mission of the author of our Religion, and my opinions are the result of a long and patient investigation of that subject. You shall receive my Creed shortly. In the mean while we will agree, to disagree.¹¹⁵

From this letter, Jefferson certainly learned that his friend Dr. Rush was more orthodox in his faith than Jefferson may have expected from a man of science. Rush apparently was not impressed with Jefferson's insistence that the religion of Jesus be examined from an historical basis with an emphasis on the moral doctrine of love which Jesus taught.

On August 4, 1804, Jefferson once again attempted to reveal his religious views to Dr. Rush by offering to send

him a copy of his extracts of gospels, which Jefferson referred to as "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth."¹¹⁶ Rush wrote back to Jefferson on August 29, 1804, in such a manner that Jefferson must have realized that he and Rush would never be able to agree on their interpretations of the Christian religion. Rush informed Jefferson that, "I shall receive with pleasure the publication you have promised me upon the character of the Messiah, but unless it advances it to divinity, and renders his death as well as his life necessary for the restoration of mankind, I shall not concur with its author."¹¹⁷ The requirements that Rush placed upon Jefferson as being proper for the character of Jesus were the very characteristics that Jefferson objected to as a corruption of the character of Jesus, due to the misuse of the teachings of Plato.

After Dr. Priestley died in 1804, Jefferson received a letter from Priestley's son who promised to send a copy of The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared With Revelation.¹¹⁸ Priestley's son, who was also named Joseph Priestley, assured Jefferson that he would keep Jefferson's letters to his father regarding religion a secret, but he added, ". . . two or three persons asked me whether my father had not left behind him a work undertaken at your suggestion, and they informed me that they understood that to be the case" ¹¹⁹ On December 24, 1804, Jefferson wrote back to Priestley's son and said:

Your favor of the 20th came to hand last night and I shall receive and read with great satisfaction the last work of your father as I have done what ever came from his pen. That he undertook the work at my request I have no objection to have known. My wish was confined to the suppression of the Syllabus I sent him, until the political passions which have been kindled against me shall be so far subsided as to admit its being read with candid & just dispositions.¹²⁰

The Syllabus that Jefferson feared would become public was the one he had sent to both Dr. Priestley and to Dr. Rush in 1803. Fortunately, for Jefferson, his syllabus never appeared in the newspapers, as Dumas Malone observed, "The syllabus did not get out, to be trampled underfoot, but fortunately it has been preserved into a time when anybody who regards it as a gem need have no fear in saying so."¹²¹

In 1813, Jefferson once again had to request that his letters on religion be kept secret. Dr. Rush died in April of 1813, and Jefferson wrote to his son, Richard Rush, to express his condolences by saying, "No one has taken a more sincere part than myself in the affliction which has befallen your family, by the loss of your inestimable and ever to be lamented father"¹²² After expressing his sympathy, Jefferson went on to request that his letters on religion be returned to him, particularly the letter he sent on April 21, 1803, which included his syllabus. Jefferson wrote:

I very much wish that these letters should remain unseen and unknown, and, if it would be too much to ask their return, I would earnestly entreat of you so to dispose

of them as that they might never be seen, if possible, but by yourself, with whom I know their contents would be safe. I have too many enemies disposed to make a lacerating use of them, not to feel anxieties inspired by a love of tranquility, [sic] now become the summum bonum of life.¹²³

NOTES

¹Both Ford and Bergh included the same six letters from Jefferson to Priestley. Bergh included twelve letters from Jefferson to Rush. In addition to these collections of Jefferson's writings, Dickinson W. Adams' Jefferson's Extracts From the Gospels was also particularly useful since Adams published some letters that are not available in either Ford or Bergh.

²Millicent E. Sowerby. Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1953), 2:121-22 and 2:171.

³Joseph Priestley, An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ (Birmingham: 1786), vol. 6 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1818), iv-v.

⁴Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), vol. II, 2:369.

⁵Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, April 23, 1803, in Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr., ed., The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 244.

⁶Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 94.

⁷Ira V. Brown, "The Religion of Joseph Priestley," Pennsylvania History, 24 (April 1957): 85-100.

⁸Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Cappon, The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 369.

⁹Joseph Priestley, The History of the Corruptions of Christianity (Birmingham, 1782), vol. 5 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1818), 25.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Frederick Coppleston, S. J., Augustine to Scotus, in A History of Philosophy (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1950; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:27.

¹³Ibid., 28.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Priestley, The History of the Corruptions, 34.

¹⁶Ibid., 35.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 37.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 40.

²¹A. H. M. Jones, Constantine and the Conversion of Europe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1989), 119.

²²Priestley, The History of the Corruptions, 42.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Dickinson W. Adams, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels: "The Philosophy of Jesus" and "The Life of Jesus" (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 388.

²⁵Sowerby, Catalogue of the Library, 2:143.

²⁶Ibid., 143-45.

²⁷Charles B. Sanford, Thomas Jefferson and His Library (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), 131.

²⁸Ibid., 94.

²⁹Priestley, The History of the Corruptions, 506.

³⁰Priestley, An History of the Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, 6:152.

³¹Joseph Priestley, A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire (Birmingham: 1790), vol. 10 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1819).

³²*Ibid.*, 137.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Priestley, An History of the Early Opinions, 6:152.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 197.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*, 154.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 155.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Priestley, An History of the Early Opinions, 7:180.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 137.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 180.

⁴³Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 368.

⁴⁴Thomas Jefferson to James Smith, December 8, 1822, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 409.

⁴⁵Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The Works of Thomas Jefferson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), 9:418.

⁴⁶Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, May 14, 1820, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:562.

⁴⁷Sanford, Thomas Jefferson and His Library, 133.

⁴⁸Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:567.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 568.

⁵⁰Catherine L. Albanese observed that "Plato had taught that the real world was the world of Ideas or Forms, on which the physical material universe was modeled. Thus, the real tree was the abstract idea of a tree that any tree reflected." Quoted in Catherine L. Albanese, America Religions and Religion (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), 254.

⁵¹Thomas Jefferson to John Davis, January 18, 1824, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 413.

⁵²Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:568.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., 567.

⁵⁷Brown, "Religion of Joseph Priestley," 93-94.

⁵⁸Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 388.

⁵⁹Dickinson W. Adams pointed this out in an explanatory note in Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 391. Merrill D. Peterson provided the same list in Thomas Jefferson: Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1431.

⁶⁰Thomas Jefferson Randolph quoted in Henry S. Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Derby and Jackson, 199 Nassau Street, 1858), 3:672.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Priestley, The History of the Corruptions, 32.

⁶³Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 327.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1813, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:359-60.

⁶⁷Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 331.

⁶⁸Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 328.

⁶⁹Jefferson wrote to Joseph Priestley's son in regard to the book The Doctrine of Heathen Philosophy Compared with Revelation and said, ". . . that he [Joseph Priestley] undertook the work at my request; I have no objection to have known," in Sowerby, Catalogue of the Library, 2:121.

⁷⁰Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, April 24, 1803, *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷¹Thomas Jefferson, "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared With Those of Others," in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1123-26.

⁷²Dickinson W. Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 336.

⁷³Jefferson, "Syllabus of an Estimate," in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1123-26.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Joseph Priestley to Thomas Jefferson, May 7, 1803, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 339.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 392.

⁸⁰Joseph Priestley to Thomas Jefferson, May 5, 1803, in *Ibid.*, 340.

⁸¹Joseph Priestley, Socrates and Jesus Compared (Northumberland: 1803) vol. 17 of The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, ed., John T. Rutt (London, 1820), 402.

⁸²Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 96.

⁸³Jefferson wrote in his "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus" that ". . . no notice should be taken of the corruptions of reason among the ancients, . . ." in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1123.

⁸⁴Priestley, Socrates and Jesus, 403.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 413.

⁸⁷Thomas Jefferson, "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared With Those of Others," in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1123.

⁸⁸Priestley, Socrates and Jesus, 413-14.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 414.

⁹⁰Thomas Jefferson to William Short, August 4, 1820, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1436.

⁹¹Priestley, Socrates and Jesus, 434.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 415.

⁹³*Ibid.*

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 415-16.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 416.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:433.

⁹⁸George W. Corner, ed., The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His Travels Through Life Together with his Common Place Book For 1789-1813 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1948), 18.

⁹⁹Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 151.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 152.

¹⁰²Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, August 22, 1800, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 318.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, in Ford, ed., The Works of Thomas Jefferson, 9:148.

¹⁰⁵Merrill Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1525.

¹⁰⁶Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., "An Address to the Voters of Delaware from a Christian Federalist," in History of American Presidential Elections 1789-1968 (New York: Chelsea House, 1971), 1:150.

¹⁰⁷Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, in Ford, ed., The Works of Thomas Jefferson, 9:148.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, October 6, 1800, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 321.

¹¹⁰Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in Ibid., 331.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, May 5, 1803, in Ibid., 338.

¹¹⁶Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, August 4, 1804, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 341.

¹¹⁷Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, August 29, 1804, in Ibid.

¹¹⁸The son of Joseph Priestley to Thomas Jefferson, undated, in Sowerby, Catalogue, 2:121.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Thomas Jefferson to the son of Joseph Priestley, undated, in Ibid.

¹²¹Dumas Malone, Jefferson The President: First Term 1801-1805 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 204.

¹²²Thomas Jefferson to Richard Rush, undated, in Sowerby, Catalogue, 2:173.

¹²³Ibid.

" . . . there never would have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest."

Thomas Jefferson, 1816

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE
CORRESPONDENCE WITH HIS FRIENDS,
ON PLATO, FREEDOM AND BELIEF

Except in his letters to John Adams, Jefferson referred to Plato in just seven of the preserved letters which he wrote between 1785 and 1822.¹ While these letters cover a period of thirty-seven years, the majority of them was written from 1816 to 1822. In these letters, Jefferson typically referred to Plato in order to illustrate his argument that Christianity had become corrupted through metaphysical speculation. Jefferson would occasionally attack theologians and priests without mentioning Plato, yet in these attacks he uses language that indicates his contempt for the speculative mysticism in eighteenth century Christianity.

The first time that Jefferson referred to Plato in his correspondence was in a letter to his fourteen-year-old nephew Peter Carr. Jefferson was in Paris serving as foreign minister when he wrote Carr on August 19, 1785. Carr had just left Monticello for Williamsburg in order to

attend the College of William and Mary.² Jefferson was concerned that Carr had wasted too much time away from his studies, and he wanted his nephew to make up for this loss by reading the right books in their proper order. Jefferson contended that "I am mortified to hear that you have lost so much time Time now begins to be precious to you. Every day you lose, will retard a day your entrance on that public stage whereon you may begin to be useful to yourself."³

After admonishing his nephew to make up for lost time, Jefferson expressed interest in Carr's moral values. For Jefferson, the essence of religion was found in living a good life, one which reflected honesty and integrity. He advised Carr to "Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act."⁴ Before taking up the practical business of a scheduled reading program, Jefferson continued by stressing the importance of honesty:

And never suppose, that in any possible situation, or under any circumstance, it is best for you to do an dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you. Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly.⁵

After this admonition, Jefferson advised Carr that "It is time to be choice in your reading; to begin to pursue a regular course in it; and not to suffer yourself to be

turned to the right or the left by reading anything out of that course."⁶

Jefferson's own familiarity with this reading course is evident in that he told Carr, "I have long ago digested a plan for you, suited to the circumstances in which you will be placed."⁷ He urged Carr to begin with ancient history by reading Oliver Goldsmith's History of Greece for a "digested view" of the field.⁸ After familiarizing himself with a general survey of ancient Greece, Carr was instructed to read the following authors in exact order: "Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon[tis] Hellenica, Xenophon[tis] Anabasis, Arrian, Quintus Curtius, Diodorus Siculus, Justin."⁹ After these books were read, Carr was instructed to turn to the history of Rome. Jefferson recommended reading "Livy, Sullust, [sic] Caesar, Cicero's epistles, Suetonius, Tacitus, Gibbon."¹⁰ Once Carr had finished this reading list, Jefferson recommended that he go straight to modern history.¹¹ It is interesting to note that Jefferson again completely eliminated the history of the Middle Ages from his recommendations. However, he did recommend some books with would inculcate good moral lessons by saying, "In morality, read Epictetus, Xenophon[tis] Memorabilia, Plato's Socratic dialogues, Cicero's philosophies, Antoninus, and Seneca."¹² Jefferson never argued that Plato should not be read. He, in fact, found Plato to be an instructive author within the historical setting of the ancient world.

However, insofar as Plato's ideas exerted a continuing influence upon Christianity, he continued to reject him.

The next time Jefferson referred to Plato in his correspondence was on January 9, 1816. Rather than discussing Plato in terms of acquiring knowledge of the ancient world, Jefferson discussed Plato in terms of religion. In his letters, Jefferson assumed that his fellow correspondents were as well versed in the ancient authors as he was. He did not bother to explain any of the salient points in the Platonic or Neo-Platonic doctrines, such as the theory of the forms or the idea of the Logos. However, he adamantly argued that Christianity had been corrupted by the theologians who had misused Plato through the centuries. On January 9, 1816, Jefferson wrote to Charles Thomson, a man who had been his friend for close to fifty years.¹³ Thomson had recently written a synopsis of the Gospels and Jefferson commended his work, saying it "bears the stamp of that accuracy which marks everything from you, and will be useful to those who, not taking things on trust, recur for themselves to the fountain of pure morals."¹⁴

Jefferson used this occasion to inform Thomson that he too had made a "wee little-book from the same materials, which I call the philosophy of Jesus"¹⁵ This was Jefferson's response to those who had complicated the simple teachings of Jesus with metaphysical theology. He explained that he had made his synopsis as a model of the pure

teachings of Jesus. According to Jefferson, his book was "a paradigm of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject."¹⁶ Jefferson did not think there was anything unchristian about editing the Gospels to reflect his personal understanding of God. He was coming to the teaching of Jesus through his own sense of faith and reason, and as far as he was concerned, no one else had the right to sit in judgment upon his personal faith. The Bill of Rights had ensured for Jefferson, as well as for the rest of the citizens of the United States, that the human mind was entitled to complete liberty in matters concerning faith. In creating his own Bible, Jefferson was able to eliminate the idea of the Logos in the first chapter of John, and he further argued that his Philosophy of Jesus was:

. . . a document in proof that I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call me infidel and themselves Christians and preachers of the gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said nor saw. They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the great reformer of the vicious ethics and deism of the Jews, were he to return to earth, would not recognize one feature.¹⁷

Jefferson's argument was not directed against anyone's personal faith, including that of the Jews. He never told anyone not to believe that Jesus was God, and he never criticized anyone who did believe this. Rather, his

argument was directed against the theologians and the clergy, who proselytized and threatened individuals with eternal damnation for failing to comprehend the mysteries of the Trinity. Jefferson's own religious thinking, however, was attacked by those who called him an atheist, and his letter to Charles Thomson in which he argued that he was a Christian became a source of annoyance and embarrassment to him.¹⁸ The reasons for this embarrassment arose because Thomson had told Mr. Delaplaine that he had recently received a letter from Mr. Jefferson in which he affirmed that he was a Christian.¹⁹ Joseph Delaplaine was the author of Delaplaine's Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters,²⁰ It was through his conversation with Thomson that rumors began to circulate throughout Philadelphia that Jefferson had converted to orthodox Christianity.²¹ Jefferson consistently had trouble with others attacking his religious views, and a recurrent theme in many of his criticisms of orthodox Christianity was the problem that his comments on Plato were often overlooked, so that he was seen as favoring orthodox Christianity rather than opposing it. After he wrote to Thomson in January of 1816, Jefferson responded to the rumors that he had become an orthodox Christian in letters to George Logan and Margaret Bayard Smith.²²

On July 21, 1816, Margaret Bayard Smith wrote Jefferson in regard to "a rumor which has lately become the

topic of conversation; which is; that in a letter which you have written to Mr. Charles Thomson, you have expressed opinions so favorable to the Christian religion, that they amount to a profession of faith."²³ Margaret Smith could have been spared the effort of writing such an inquiry had she seen the letter to Thomson. Jefferson responded to her in a friendly manner, yet with a sense of alarm that his religious views were the subject of public scrutiny. The very implication in Smith's question betrayed an opinion, offensive to Jefferson, that he was somehow an infidel. Jefferson knew Margaret Smith from his eight years in the White House. She was the wife of Samuel Harrison Smith, the editor of the National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser.²⁴ Margaret Smith was also a socialite in Washington, and Jefferson had been on friendly terms with her and her husband during his presidency.²⁵

On August 6, 1816, Jefferson wrote back to Smith and expressed a sense of incredulity at the suggestion that he had recently changed his religion to become a Christian. Jefferson wondered, "A change from what?" He proceeded to argue:

The priests indeed have heretofore thought proper to ascribe to me religious, or rather antireligious sentiments, of their own fabric, but such as soothed their resentments against the Act of Virginia for establishing religious freedom. They wish him to be thought Atheist, Deist, or Devil, who could advocate freedom from their religious dictations. But I have ever thought religion a concern purely between our god and our consciences, for which we were accountable to

him, and not to the priests. I never told my own religion, nor scrutinised [sic] that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed. I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read. By the same test the world must judge me. But this does not satisfy the priesthood. They must have a positive, a declared assent to all their interested absurdities. My opinion is that there would never have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest. The artificial structures they have built on the purest of all moral systems, for the purpose of deriving from it pence and power, revolts those who think for themselves, and who read in that system only what is really there.²⁶

Rather than engaging Smith in a discussion of the metaphysical speculations of "Platonic Christianity," Jefferson used this letter as an opportunity to further argue for the principles of religious freedom. The "interested absurdities" which Jefferson referred to were rooted, in Jefferson's argument, in the philosophy of Plato. Jefferson was particularly galled by ministers who sat in judgment upon the faith of others. To Jefferson, these priests and theologians were asking people to accept Platonism rather than the simple teachings of Jesus. Jefferson simply had no use for theologians, who, he argued, had corrupted the teachings of Jesus and turned the religion of Christ into Christian mythology.

The letter which Jefferson wrote to Thomson was to cause him further embarrassment. On November 12, 1816, he wrote to George Logan regarding another rumor concerning the Thomson letter. Logan, who had been a Senator²⁷ during Jefferson's presidency, had written to Jefferson in October

of 1816 and said, "I contemplate with great satisfaction the publication of your system of ethicks [sic] extracted from the holy scriptures, as tending to support the proper maxims."²⁸ Jefferson responded to Logan by asserting, "I am quite astonished at the idea which seems to have got abroad; that I propose publishing something on the subject of religion. And this is said to have arisen from a letter of mine to my friend Charles Thomson, in which there is no trace of such an idea."²⁹ While Jefferson was correct in arguing that there was no indication in the Thomson letter that he was interested in seeing his synopsis of the Gospels published, he had, however, suggested to another friend, Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, that he allow its publication in England under Van der Kemp's name.³⁰ Van der Kemp was a mutual friend of John Adams and Jefferson, and Adams had trusted Van der Kemp enough to show him a copy of Jefferson's synopsis of the Gospels. Even though Jefferson had informed Thomson that he had made a synopsis of the Gospels, the only other person who had a copy of it was John Adams.³¹ Van der Kemp wrote to Jefferson and informed him that he wanted to write a history of Jesus, so he asked Jefferson for permission to include his synopsis. Jefferson wrote back to Van der Kemp, "If the syllabus and extract . . . are worth a place under the same cover with your biography, they are at your service. I ask only one condition, that no possibility shall be admitted of my name

being even intimated with the publication."³² Jefferson's desire to keep his religious views out of the view of public attention remained consistent his entire life. He always argued that such matters were a concern only between an individual's conscience and his God. The reasons for this secrecy do not seem to be politically motivated. Even as late as 1816, with no more elections before him, Jefferson insisted on religious privacy.

On January 5, 1817, Charles Thomson wrote Jefferson to explain how all the rumors which circulated during 1816 were set in motion. Thomson informed Jefferson he had misplaced the letter, and then later got into an argument with Mr. Delaplaine, who had raised questions regarding Jefferson's "infidelity and disbelief of Christianity."³³ Thomson explained that this comment aroused "my resentment and I wished to answer it by a sentence of your letter which at the instant occurred to my mind."³⁴ The sentence that Thomson remembered was Jefferson's comment that he was "a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus Christ."³⁵ Had Thomson recalled the very next line, where Jefferson pointed out that this was something entirely "different from the Platonists, who call me infidel and themselves Christians"³⁶ Jefferson might have been spared the entire episode.

Fourteen days after Thomson sent the letter, Jefferson wrote back to him, on January 29, 1817, regretting

that Thomson "thought the incident with Mr. Delaplaine worth an explanation."³⁷ While Jefferson naturally felt that his religious faith was none of Delaplaine's business, he informed Thomson that Delaplaine had written him at Monticello and "asked me questions which I answer only to one being."³⁸ He had refused to answer Delaplaine's questions, and he informed Thomson that:

To himself [Delaplaine] therefore I replied 'say nothing of my religion; it is known to my god and myself alone. It's evidence before the world is to be sought in my life. If that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.' It is a singular anxiety which some people have that we should all think alike. Would the world be more beautiful were all our faces alike? . . . These are the absurdities into which those run who usurp the throne of god, and dictate to him what he should have done. May they, with all their metaphysical riddles, appear before that tribunal with as clean hands and hearts as you and I shall. There, suspended in the scales of eternal justice, faith and works will shew their worth by their weight.³⁹

In 1818, Jefferson received some pamphlets on Unitarianism from Salma Hale, a congressman who had previously visited Monticello.⁴⁰ In thanking Hale for the pamphlets, Jefferson further argued that "Our saviors did not come into the world to save metaphysicians only."⁴¹ He pointed out to Hale that the doctrines of Jesus "are leveled to the simplest understandings" which led him to definitely assert that, "only by banishing Hierophantic mysteries and Scholastic subtleties, which they have nicknamed Christianity, and getting back to the plain and

unsophisticated precepts of Christ, that we become real Christians."⁴²

On January 3, 1824, John Davis, a distinguished attorney in Massachusetts, had written to Jefferson offering to send him some Unitarian sermons.⁴³ Jefferson answered a short time later. After thanking Davis for the sermons, which, Jefferson said, he had "read them with great satisfaction, and always rejoice in efforts to restore us to primitive Christianity, . . ."⁴⁴ he proceeded to denounce Calvin for being influenced by the philosophy of Plato. His criticism was not gentle. He argued:

The metaphysical abstractions of Athanasius, and the manic ravings of Calvin, tintured plentifully with the foggy dreams of Plato, have so loaded it [Christianity] with absurdities and incomprehensibilities, as to drive into infidelity men who had not time, patience, or opportunity to strip it of its' meretricious trappings,⁴⁵

Even though Jefferson was extremely critical of Calvin, theologians, and the clergy, he refrained from making harsh comments when he was engaged directly with someone who claimed that Calvinism or orthodox Christianity was the basis of his faith. On June 14, 1819, Jefferson received a letter from a Calvinist named Ezra Stiles Ely. Ely was the pastor of a Presbyterian church and he sent Jefferson a copy of a book he wrote entitled, Conversations on the Science of the Human Mind.⁴⁶ Jefferson's response to Ely was restrained. He merely remarked, "You say you are a Calvinist. I am not. I am of a sect by myself, as

far as I know."⁴⁷ Jefferson briefly described his belief that God cannot be defined by arguing that Jesus had not defined God any further than to say that "god is good and perfect"⁴⁸ From this, Jefferson concluded with "I am therefore of this theology, believing that we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition. And if we could all, after his example leave the subject as undefinable, we should all be of one sect, doers of good and eschewers of evil."⁴⁹ For Jefferson, the solution to the arguments that tore those who claimed to be followers of Christ into different factions and arguing sects, was to leave metaphysical inquiry alone and have nothing to do with theologians.

Four months after he wrote to Ely, Jefferson returned to the subject of Plato in a letter to William Short. Like Jefferson, Short had graduated from the college of William and Mary, and both Jefferson and George Wythe served as Short's examiners before he was admitted to the bar.⁵⁰ In 1784, Short went to Paris to work for Jefferson as his personal secretary and Malone observed that Jefferson considered him the "greatest young man he knew"⁵¹ On October 31, 1819, Jefferson wrote to Short a revealing letter that demonstrated Jefferson's argument that Christianity had been corrupted through the misuse of the teachings of Plato.

Jefferson began his discussion of Plato with some general comments on ancient philosophy. Jefferson told Short that he was an "Epicurean" and that the doctrines of Epicurus contain "every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us."⁵² Jefferson lamented the fact that Epictetus, and even Cicero, had misrepresented the Epicurean doctrine. He compared this misrepresentation of Epicurus to the Christians' misrepresentation of the teachings of Christ through a misuse of Plato. Jefferson acknowledged that Plato was an elegant stylist, and he referred to Plato as being Cicero's "prototype."⁵³ From this comparison of style between Cicero and Plato, however, Jefferson went on to say:

His prototype, Plato, eloquent as himself, dealing out mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind, has been deified by certain sects usurping the name of Christians; because in his foggy conceptions, they found a basis of impenetrable darkness whereon to rear fabrications as delirious, of their own invention. These they fathered blasphemously on him whom they claimed as their founder, but who would disclaim them with the indignation which their caricatures of his religion so justly excite.⁵⁴

While Jefferson found Plato to be full of mysticism and unintelligible "foggy conceptions," it was the use that Christians had made of Plato's philosophy that Jefferson objected to most strenuously. For Jefferson, these sects were not even Christian, but were merely "usurpers" and blasphemers. Jefferson argued that these Christians had misrepresented Christ just as Plato had misrepresented

Socrates. Jefferson complained that "Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the Memorabilia of Xenophon. For Plato made him one of his own collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies under the mantle of his name; a liberty of which we are told Socrates complained."⁵⁵

Jefferson was confident that he could easily perceive the true teachings of Christ from those that had been tainted with Platonism. Jefferson told Short that:

Abstracting what is really his [Christ's] from the rubbish in which it is buried, easily distinguished by its lustre from the dross of his biographers, and as separable from that as the diamond from the dung hill, we have the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man"⁵⁶

At the bottom of the page in this letter to Short, Jefferson listed all of the aspects of artificial Platonic Christianity that he hoped to see eradicated. The "artificial systems" that Jefferson listed were, "the immaculate conception of Jesus, his deification, the creation of the world by him, his miraculous powers, his resurrection and visible ascension, his corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, orders of Hierarchy, & [et]c."⁵⁷

Jefferson informed Short that Dr. Joseph Priestley was devoted to restoring Christianity to the original genuine teachings of Jesus, and that hopefully Priestley would be able to "effect a quiet euthanasia of the heresies of bigotry and fanaticism which have so long triumphed over

human reason."⁵⁸ He further confided in Short that he had made a synopsis of Jesus' teachings that places "the character of Jesus in its true and high light, . . . as a great reformer" ⁵⁹

On December 1, 1819, William Short wrote to Jefferson and urged him to continue working on his abstract of the doctrines of Jesus. Short told Jefferson that "you observe that what is genuine is easily distinguished from the rubbish in which it is buried--if so, it is an irresistible reason for your continuing the work--for others it would seem, have not found it thus distinguishable," ⁶⁰ Short also admitted that he was one of those who could not easily distinguish the actual teachings of Christ from the supposed teachings. ⁶¹

In his next letter, Short begged Jefferson for a copy of the syllabus of the Philosophy of Jesus. ⁶² Jefferson honored this request in April of 1820. When he did so, Jefferson told Short that he was confident that the work would remain a secret. ⁶³ Jefferson was concerned about public uproar over his work and Short assured him that it would not "get into hands that might make improper use of it." ⁶⁴

On August 4, 1820, Jefferson again wrote to William Short explaining how the genuine teachings of Jesus could be recognized from the false teachings of theologians. In this letter, Jefferson explained how he approached this

historical problem by providing examples of how he worked, and the sorts of questions he raised. He also discussed his motives and the key insights that guided him. Jefferson said that his motive for editing the gospels as he did "was to justify the character of Jesus against the fiction of his pseudo-followers which have exposed him to the inference of being an imposter."⁶⁵ After Jefferson acknowledged his own bias in his work, he proceeded to explain how he used history as a firm foundation for his position. Jefferson began with a discussion of the ancient Roman historian Livy, and then he proceeded to discuss Plutarch and Plato.

Jefferson argued that:

When Livy or Siculus, for example, tell us of things which coincide with our experience of the order of nature, we credit them on their word But when they tell us of calves speaking, of statues sweating blood we reject these as fables, not belonging to history.⁶⁶

Jefferson logically argued that anyone would consider such a story to be myth or a fable if it failed to coincide with the natural laws of the universe. He further argued that there was enough historical information about such individuals, such as Caesar, Cicero or Socrates, that if a writer, Plutarch or Plato for example, were to write things contrary to what is known, then "we should reject what was so inconsistent with their established characters,"⁶⁷

Jefferson went on to explain how he perceived Plato in relationship to the actual historical character of Socrates, as well as how his teaching affected Christianity. Jefferson wrote:

When therefore Plato puts into his [Socrates] mouth such fancies, such paralogisms and sophisms as a schoolboy would be ashamed of, we conclude they were the whimsies of Plato's own foggy brain, and acquit Socrates of puerilities so unlike his character. (Speaking of Plato I will add that no writer antient [*sic*] or modern has bewildered the world with more ignes fatue than this renowned philosopher, in Ethics, in Politics, and Physics. . . . Plato's visions have furnished a basis for endless systems of mystical theology, and he is therefore all but adopted as a Christian saint.⁶⁸

Jefferson saw Plato as being the main culprit behind the false characterizations of both Socrates and Jesus. It was necessary for Jefferson to point out how Plato had become "all but adopted as a Christian saint" in order to demonstrate how mystical thinking had destroyed simple historical validity. The closest Jefferson ever came to directly attacking any particular Christian sect by name was in his comments on Calvin. By attacking the dogma of Calvinism, Jefferson was also criticizing much of orthodox Christianity. As has been suggested, he considered such doctrines as the deity of Christ, and the resurrection, as being mystically tainted elements of Platonic thought.

Jefferson again singled out Calvin in a letter he wrote on November 4, 1820, to a Unitarian minister, Jared Sparks, who had previously sent him a copy of his book, Letters on the Ministry, Ritual and Doctrines of the

Protestant Episcopal Church.⁶⁹ In his letter, Jefferson told Sparks that "The metaphysical insanities of Athanasius, of Loyola, and of Calvin, are to my understanding, mere relapses into polytheism, differing from paganism only by being more unintelligible."⁷⁰

In a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse, Jefferson articulated a fuller commentary on Calvin in relation to Platonic Christianity. Waterhouse had previously sent off a letter enclosing a lecture that he had written on the harmful effects of alcohol and tobacco. Jefferson used the letter as an occasion to further discuss his views on religion and Plato. Benjamin Waterhouse had once been a professor of physics at Harvard. His religion was Unitarian, and he advised Jefferson that there was great tension between the Unitarians in New England and the Calvinists.⁷¹ In his answering letter, Jefferson thanked him for his lecture on tobacco and alcohol, but added that "I expect it will be but a sermon to the wind."⁷² After expressing doubt as to how well received Waterhouse's sermon would be welcomed by the public, Jefferson added:

You will find it as difficult to inculcate these sanative precepts on the sensualists of the present day, as to convince an Athanasian that there is but one God. I wish success to both attempts, and am happy to learn from you that the latter, at least, is making progress, and the more rapidly in proportions as our Platonising Christians make more stir and noise about it.⁷³

In his first draft of this letter, Jefferson originally wrote "anti-Christian maniacs" instead of "Platonizing

Christians," but he changed it to read as it does before sending it to Waterhouse. While he certainly felt that mystical Christianity appealed actually to those he considered privately "anti-Christian maniacs," the term "Platonising Christians" was more specific and consistent with his views.

Jefferson next outlined for Benjamin Waterhouse a comparison between the doctrines of Jesus and those of Calvin. He argued that the "doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend all to the happiness of man."⁷⁴ He continued by saying that, according to Jesus:

1. that there is one God, and he is all-perfect:
 2. that there is a future state of rewards and punishments:
 3. that to love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.
- These are the great points on which he endeavored to reform religion of the Jews. But compare with these the demoralising dogmas of Calvin.
1. that there are three Gods:
 2. that good works, or the love of our neighbor are nothing:
 3. that Faith is every thing; and the more incomprehensible the proposition, the more merit in it's [sic] [that which is incomprehensible, i.e., the Trinity] faith:
 4. that reason in religion is of unlawful use:
 5. That God, from the beginning, elected certain individuals to be saved, and certain others to be damned; and that no crimes of the former can damn them, no virtues of the latter save.⁷⁵

After this comparison, Jefferson asked Waterhouse, "Now which of these is the true and charitable Christian?"⁷⁶ Jefferson answered his own question by warning that those who teach such doctrines as those of Calvin, "are the false

shepherds, foretold as to enter, not by the door into the sheep-fold, but to climb up some other way."⁷⁷ Jefferson vehemently argued that "They were mere usurpers of the Christian name, teaching a Counter-religion, made up of the deliria of crazy imaginations, as foreign from Christianity as is that of Mahomet."⁷⁸ Jefferson considered the religion of the Quakers, as well as the Unitarians, to be the wiser path to follow. Because they "scismatize [sic] about no mysteries" and did not wander away from "common sense." He warned, however, that those who fabricate "formulas of creed and Confessions of Faith," would be those who ". . . destroyed the religion of Jesus, and made of Christendom a mere Aceldama: that will give up morals for mysteries, and Jesus for Plato."⁷⁹

After Jefferson sent this letter to Waterhouse on June 26, 1822, Waterhouse responded with a request that Jefferson allow it to be published. This drew an immediate response from Jefferson. On July 9, 1822, Jefferson stated unequivocally, "No, my dear Sir, not for the world. Into what a nest of hornets it would thrust my head!"⁸⁰ Waterhouse seemed hopeful that Jefferson's influence would be such that he could assist the cause for the restoration of primitive Christianity. Personally, Jefferson considered this an impossible task. He told Waterhouse that "I should as soon undertake to bring the crazy skulls of Bedlam to sound understanding, as to inculcate reason into that of an

Athanasian Keep me therefore from the fire and faggots of Calvin and his victim Servetus."⁸¹

Jefferson was content to let the writings of Dr. Priestley and the influence of Unitarianism win the battle of restoring Christianity to its authentic principles. He informed Waterhouse that Baltimore had at least one or two Unitarian churches, and that at one time, Philadelphia had given a good reception to Dr. Priestley.⁸² Jefferson stated confidently that ". . . the breeze begins to be felt which precedes the storm; and fanaticism is all in a bustle, shutting its doors and windows to keep it out. But it will come, and drive before it the foggy mists of Platonism which have so long obscured our atmosphere."⁸³ As far as engaging in a religious battle publicly, Jefferson was content to leave the "restoration of primitive Christianity" to the young.⁸⁴ He was, after all, seventy-nine years old and he compared the task to be that of being Don Quixote fighting windmills. Jefferson argued that, "Don Quixote undertook to redress the bodily wrongs of the world, but the redressment of mental vagaries would be an enterprise more than Quixotic."⁸⁵

Even though Jefferson denied Waterhouse's request to publish his letter from June 26, 1822, a version of it was published in several Massachusetts papers.⁸⁶ This occurred because Waterhouse had carelessly shown Jefferson's letter to some of his friends who proceeded to give a

garbled version of it to the press.⁸⁷ This led Waterhouse to attempt to correct the inaccurate version of Jefferson's letter with a more authentic version. Waterhouse proceeded to publish this corrected version in the Richmond Enquirer and the Boston Patriot. It is interesting to note that in Waterhouse's publication of Jefferson's letter, all of the comments that Jefferson made in regard to Calvin and Plato were edited. On September 6, 1822, The Richmond Enquirer ran the following article written by Waterhouse:

A MISTAKE RECTIFIED

It has been asserted, from memory, in some of the Papers, that in letters from "the great philosopher and statesman of the south," to a literary gentleman of eminence in this neighborhood, "that if the religion of Jesus had always been preached, in its original simplicity and power, there would not at this moment have been a single human being who was not a Christian." This is not exactly so expressed by the illustrious writer. His words are: Their blasphemies [the corrupters of Christianity], have driven thinking men into infidelity; who have, too hastily, rejected the supposed author HIMSELF, with the horrors so falsely imputed to HIM. Had the doctrines of JESUS been preached always as purely as they came from his lips, the whole civilized world would now have been Christian. I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of ONE GOD is reviving. But much I fear that when this great truth shall be established, its votaries will fall into the fatal errors of fabricating formulas of creed and confessions of faith, the engines which so soon destroyed the religion of JESUS, and made of Christendom a mere Akaldama. The letters are in Mr. Jefferson's happiest style and amply refute the calumnies of his political enemies respecting his opinion of the Christian religion and its immaculate author.⁸⁸

It is interesting to note that Waterhouse edited the final sentence and left Jefferson's own sentence incomplete. Had he completed the sentence, the readers of the Richmond Enquirer would have read Jefferson's accusation that the theologians had "made of Christendom a mere Akaldama: that they will give up morals for mysteries, and Jesus for Plato."⁸⁹ By removing the references to Plato and Calvin from Jefferson's letter, Waterhouse removed so much of the context that there is arguably little in it that a Calvinist would not agree to. It should also be pointed out that Waterhouse added his own capitalization to Jefferson's letter. Every reference to Jesus--"him" and "himself"--was not capitalized in Jefferson's original letter.

NOTES

¹These letters were culled from Dickinson W. Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983) and Merrill D. Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1984) and Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 20 vols. (Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907). All of these works are nicely indexed and I counted the Plato citations through the indexes as well as by going through letters. Some of these letters are only in the Adams' edition, Jefferson Extracts. Adams has provided brief biographical comments on Jefferson's correspondents as well as one hundred pages of Jefferson's letters on religious questions. Jefferson's Extracts is also particularly useful because it contains some occasional responses from those who wrote to Jefferson.

²Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 19, 1785, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 816.

³Ibid., 814.

⁴Ibid., 814-15.

⁵Ibid., 815.

⁶Ibid., 815-16.

⁷Ibid., 816.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1372.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 1373.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 1373.

¹⁸Dickinson Ward Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 366.

¹⁹Charles Thomson to Thomas Jefferson, January 5, 1817, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 384.

²⁰Susan R. Stein, The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1993), 132.

²¹Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 366.

²²Ibid.

²³Margaret Bayard Smith to Thomas Jefferson, July 21, 1816, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 377.

²⁴Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 377.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Bayard Smith, August 16, 1816, in Ibid., 376.

²⁷Adams, ed., Ibid.

²⁸George Logan to Thomas Jefferson, October 16, 1816, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 382.

²⁹Thomas Jefferson to George Logan, November 12, 1816, in Ibid., 381.

³⁰Thomas Jefferson to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, April 25, 1816, in Adams, ed., Ibid., 368.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 384.

³³Charles Thomson to Thomas Jefferson, January 5, 1817, in Adams, ed., Ibid., 384.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 9, 1816, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1372.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, January 29, 1817, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 384.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 385.

⁴¹Thomas Jefferson to Salma Hale, July 26, 1818, in Ibid., 385.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³In 1842, John Davis was a partner in the law firm of Jefferson's attorney general, Levi Lincoln. Davis would later become a congressman, a senator and then governor of Massachusetts. See Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 414.

⁴⁴Thomas Jefferson to John Davis, January 18, 1822, in Ibid., 413.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ezra Stiles Ely to Thomas Jefferson, June 14, 1819, in Ibid., 387.

⁴⁷Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles Ely, June 25, 1819, in Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Dumas Malone, Jefferson and the Rights of Man (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 8-9.

⁵¹Ibid., 9.

⁵²Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 387-88.

⁵³Ibid., 388.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid. Recent scholarship supports Jefferson's argument that Plato put his own philosophy into the dialogues of Socrates. Robin Waterfield observed that "Few, if any, scholars would disagree that it is in his earlier dialogues that Plato approximates more closely to a portrait of the historical Socrates. Socrates remains the protagonist in some of Plato's later dialogues, but increasingly becomes a mouthpiece of Plato's own ideas." Quoted in Robin Waterfield, ed., Xenophon: Conversation of Socrates (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 12. Waterfield further argued that "Xenophon's Socrates never profess[es] ignorance, but also he constantly persuades his interlocutors of views which he himself holds: in fact, for Xenophon this is the whole point of Socrates' teaching--that he was a good man and taught others what he knew. Yet Socrates' profession of ignorance is central to Plato's portrayal of his having not so much a philosophy in the sense of a system of ideas as a valuable method of inquiry. This difference, therefore, between Xenophon and Plato is striking." Ibid., 16. Waterfield also argued that Xenophon put some of his own experiences into the teachings of Socrates, for in comparing Xenophon to Plato, he noted, ". . . Xenophon certainly put his own military, agricultural and hunting expertise into Socrates' mouth; similarly, Plato in his later dialogues certainly put his own philosophical notions into Socrates' mouth." Ibid., 20.

⁵⁶Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 388.

⁵⁷Ibid., 391.

⁵⁸Ibid., 388-89.

⁵⁹Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820, in Ibid., 391.

⁶⁰William Short to Thomas Jefferson, December 1, 1819, in Ibid., 391.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²William Short to Thomas Jefferson, March 20, 1820, in Ibid., 394.

⁶³Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820, in Ibid., 391.

⁶⁴William Short to Thomas Jefferson, May 2, 1820, in Ibid., 394.

⁶⁵Thomas Jefferson to William Short, August 4, 1820, in Ibid., 395.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 402.

⁷⁰Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks, November 4, 1820, in Ibid., 401.

⁷¹Adams, ed., Ibid., 406.

⁷²Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822, in Ibid., 405.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid., 406. Jefferson's use of the word Aceldama is very interesting. Aceldama refers to the field that Judas bought with the money he received for betraying Christ. It is also sometimes used to refer to a field of blood. The spelling of this word can vary from Aceldama, Akeldama, or Hakeldama. The King James version of the Bible uses Aceldama. See, for example, Acts 1:18-19, which says, "Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, A-cel-da-ma, that is to say, The field of blood." In Jefferson's use of this word, he is clearly arguing that those who preach orthodox Christianity are betraying Christ, and leading Christians away from the teachings of Jesus. Jefferson pointed out, however, that Jesus warned his disciples that this would happen.

⁸⁰Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waterhouse, July 19, 1822, in Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 15:391.

⁸¹Ibid., 406-07.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 391-92.

⁸⁴Ibid., 391.

⁸⁵Ibid., 391.

⁸⁶Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 407.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Benjamin Waterhouse, "A Mistake Rectified" in the Richmond Enquirer, September 6, 1822, quoted in Adams, ed., Jefferson's Extracts, 408.

⁸⁹Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1459.

" . . . make the general religion a
religion of peace, reason and morality."

Thomas Jefferson, 1822

JEFFERSON'S PLATO AND THE ROLE OF HISTORY:
THE BILL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE
FOUNDING OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Thomas Jefferson trusted people to form their own opinions; in political terms, this meant that he rejected Plato's idea that the state should be ruled by philosopher-kings. Furthermore, Plato's concept of having the guardians of the state regulate and control music, literature, and even religion, Jefferson found appalling. Finally, Jefferson's rejection of the orthodox Christian dogma of his own time grew out of his awareness that that dogma had been largely formed within the mystical elaborations of Plato's thought.

Jefferson never tired of re-reading and re-examining Plato. He obviously considered Plato worthy of consideration. In his most serious and extended correspondence, Jefferson reflected an abiding interest in Plato. Jefferson admired Plato's style of writing and he also admired much of the quality of life in the ancient world. One of the attractive qualities of eighteenth

century thinkers and of Jefferson, in particular, is their ability to not only read and enjoy the works of classical authors but also to learn from them in very practical terms. Jefferson well knew that the Athens of the later Plato was democratically paralyzed, and he never accepted Plato's Republic as an answer to that paralysis.

In a direct rejection of Plato's idea of the guardians, and to ensure that no such guardians should one day rise to control freedom of thought in Virginia, Jefferson wrote the "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" in 1779.¹ The bill for religious freedom was intended to ensure that Virginia's citizens would be legally protected in their freedom of religious opinions and practice. In addition to this bill, Jefferson also demonstrated a lifelong commitment to the protection of freedom of thought by his efforts to establish the University of Virginia.

Taken together, both the bill of religious freedom and Jefferson's writing on education reveal how Jefferson worked out his philosophical and religious observations. When Jefferson wrote his bill for religious freedom in 1779, he introduced as a public document a bill which represented many of his private opinions on religion. It was a document intended to correct some of the worst abuses of the corruption of Christianity within the state of Virginia. Even as the American colonies fought for their freedom from

England, Jefferson was looking forward to increasing that freedom within Virginia so as to include freedom in religious thinking. He was, in effect, attempting to hasten a religious revolution in Virginia to accompany the political revolution. In his efforts to bring about a break from the history and traditions of Christianity in Virginia as instituted by England, Jefferson was involved in a struggle which he later described as one of the ". . . severest contests in which I have ever been engaged."²

The religious conditions in Virginia which preceded Jefferson's writing of the bill for religious freedom were not conducive to a free society. The Royal colony of Virginia had an established church that was under the control of an Anglican Bishop in England. In his Autobiography, Jefferson recalled that "The first settlers of this colony were Englishmen, loyal subjects to their king and church,"³ He went on to point out that the "grant to Sir Walter Raleigh contained an express proviso that their laws should not be against the true Christian faith, now professed in the Church of England."⁴ In order to officially conduct marriage ceremonies and baptisms, a minister had to be ordained in England by a bishop of the Anglican church.⁵

Marriages and baptisms were not legally recognized unless they were conducted within the domain of the Anglican

church.⁶ If someone was considered a dissenter, he could also be refused the opportunity to attend the College of William and Mary. Dissenters were not allowed to join or form a business corporation, and they were barred from holding any political offices.⁷ Since there were other religious sects in Virginia, such as Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers and Methodists, laws such as these were bound to cause problems.

One of the most bitter injustices to which dissenters objected was the requirement to pay taxes in order to support the established Anglican church. Each Anglican parish in Virginia had been given a glebe, or a land grant of about two hundred acres with a house for the minister.⁸ The church was under the control of the vestry. One of the powers which the vestry had was the ability to levy taxes "to build and repair churches, provide for the poor, and support the minister,"⁹ These taxes were paid by Anglicans and dissenters alike, and the idea of being forced to pay the salary of a minister with whom many disagreed was considered by Jefferson to be a form of tyranny. In his Autobiography, Jefferson recalled how the dissenters flooded the Virginia assembly in 1776 with petitions to end the payment of a tax which went to the support of the Anglican ministries.

This unrighteous compulsion to maintain teachers of what they deemed religious errors was grievously felt during the regal government, and without a hope of relief. But the first republican legislature which met in [17]76 was crowded with petitions to abolish this spiritual tyranny.¹⁰

Although Jefferson considered his bill for religious freedom to be one of his greatest achievements, he did not claim all the credit for its passage. In 1808, he recalled:

In our early struggles for liberty, religious freedom could not fail to become a primary object. All men felt the right, and a just animation to obtain it was exhibited by all. I was one only among the many who befriended its establishment, and am entitled but in common with others to a portion of that approbation which follows the fulfilment [sic] of a duty.¹¹

The religious revolution in Virginia may have been almost as important to Jefferson as the political revolution against England. Both were attempts to throw off tyranny. When he was preparing his tombstone, he said that he wanted the inscription to read, "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."¹² He went on to explain that "by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered."¹³ Dumas Malone has argued that this bill is particularly important in the history of Jefferson's thought because of "the emphasis he [himself] always gave it."¹⁴ However, Jefferson had good reason for placing such a strong emphasis on this bill, because it was his public answer to what he had deemed Platonic Christianity.

Since this point is crucial in understanding why Jefferson placed such an emphasis upon his bill for religious freedom, it seems worthwhile to briefly return again to some of his letters which particularly emphasize the argument that Plato's philosophy had corrupted Christianity and caused a strain of intolerance within the clergy. In the letter to John Adams, Jefferson had argued that the Christians after the first century and their "Platonising successors" had rejected and disavowed "the primitive Christians, who had taken their principals from the mouth of Jesus himself," ¹⁵ Again, Jefferson said that these later Christians had done this in order to ". . . legitimate the corruption which they had incorporated into the doctrines of Jesus," ¹⁶ It is clear that Jefferson intended to associate the intolerance and abuses of the clergy to the misuse of Plato's philosophy. As stated above, Jefferson had also written to Adams:

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrine of Christ levelled [*sic*] to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticism of Plato, materials with which they might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment to their order, and introduce it to profit and pre-eminence. ¹⁷

If the clergy and orthodox Christians had been legally restrained in their social and political power, perhaps Jefferson would have been less concerned. He personally did not care if his neighbors believed in "twenty gods, or no god." ¹⁸ However, he knew that the clergy held

tremendous power, and unless they were limited in their ability to enforce their views, then their intolerance would continue to grow. With this end in mind, Jefferson informed John Adams that his "law for religious freedom, . . . put down the aristocracy of the clergy, and restored to the citizens the freedom of mind" ¹⁹ The choice of Jefferson's words is interesting. To speak of the "aristocracy of the clergy" implies that Jefferson saw the relationship between the clergy and the rest of society almost in terms of a religious caste system. In arguing for the separation between the church and state, Jefferson felt that a clergyman had no business lecturing from the pulpit on any subject other than religion. ²⁰ Jefferson reasoned that if a minister did discuss from the pulpit ". . . the construction of government, or the characters or conduct of those administering it, it is a breach of contract, depriving their audiences of the kind of service for which they are salaried" ²¹ He went on to observe that "in choosing our pastor we look to his religious qualifications, without inquiring into his physical or political dogmas, with which we mean to have nothing to do." ²²

Providing the basis for religious thought was not the same thing as guaranteeing that freedom as a living reality. Jefferson knew that eradicating intolerance in religion probably could not be done. The law for religious freedom provided the framework in which tolerance could grow

into religious freedom. In his Autobiography, Jefferson recalled the difficulties in advancing the cause of religious freedom in Virginia. Before Jefferson introduced his bill in 1779, he had participated in the effort to bring down the Established Church. He wrote that the legislature,

. . . prevailed so far only as to repeal the laws which rendered criminal the maintenance of any religious opinions, the forbearance of repairing to church, or the exercise of any mode of worship: and further, to exempt dissenters from contributions to the support of the established church; and to suspend, only until the next session levies on the members of that church for the salaries of their own incumbents. For although the majority of our citizens were dissenters, as has been observed, a majority of the legislature were churchmen.²³

Even though the legislature was able to accomplish this much in 1776, Jefferson was still not satisfied. Dumas Malone pointed out that after these initial efforts by the legislature, Jefferson still contended that upon the basis of common law, "heresy was still a capital offense; and by act of Assembly denial of the Trinity or the divine authority of the Scriptures was punishable by disabilities and even by imprisonment."²⁴ The act of assembly which Malone referred to was mentioned by Jefferson in his Notes on the State of Virginia, which was written in 1781 and revised in 1782.²⁵

In 1782, Jefferson summarized the state of religion in Virginia by writing:

By our own act of assembly of 1705, c. 30, if a person brought up in the Christian religion denies the being of a God, or the Trinity, or asserts there are more Gods

than one, or denies the Christian religion to be true, or the Scriptures to be of divine authority, he is punishable on the first offence [sic] by incapacity to hold any office or employment ecclesiastical, civil, or military; on the second by disability to sue, to take any gift or legacy, to be guardian, executor, or administrator, and by three years imprisonment, without bail. . . . This is a summary view of that religious slavery, under which a people have been willing to remain, who have lavished their lives and fortunes for the establishment of their civil freedom. The error seems not sufficiently eradicated, that the operations of the mind, as well as the acts of the body, are subject to the coercion of the laws.²⁶

With such a grave situation as this, even as late as 1782, Jefferson must have agonized over the passage of his bill for religious freedom. However, since this bill would not become law until 1786, Jefferson appeared to turn to the "spirit of the People" to ensure the security of those who were not orthodox in their views. Jefferson did not think that "the people of this country would suffer an execution for heresy, or a three years imprisonment for not comprehending the mysteries of the Trinity."²⁷ However, he went on to warn that:

. . . the spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless. A single zealot may commence persecutor, and better men be his victims. It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united.²⁸

The actions which the Virginia legislature took in 1776 were, in Jefferson's argument, able to relieve the dissenters from the religious oppressions enacted by England's Parliament, but they did not provide protection

against the Virginia Assembly's actions in 1705.²⁹ The necessity of recognizing religious freedom legally was paramount in Jefferson's thinking. In preparing his bill for religious freedom, Jefferson gathered a series of notes that illustrate how he used historical methods to prepare for the legal problems involved in guaranteeing religious freedom. While there is some question as to when Jefferson wrote these notes, both Julian P. Boyd and Paul Leicester Ford have judged that they were probably written in 1776.³⁰

It is interesting that as early as 1776, Jefferson referred to Plato in his religious notes in order to demonstrate how the ancient world allowed the free reign of philosophy to correct, what Jefferson considered, the superstition of Plato. Jefferson wrote:

As the Antients [sic] tolerated visionaries & enthusiasts of all kinds so they permitted a free scope to philosophy as a balance. As the pythagoreans & latter Platonists joined with the superstition of their times the Epicureans & Academicks [sic] were allowed all the use of wit & railery against it. Thus matters were balanced; reason had play & science flourished. These contrarieties [sic] produced harmony. Superstition & enthusiasm thus let alone never raged to bloodshed, persecution & [et]c.³¹

The object of Jefferson's argument was the establishment of legal protection for religious opinion. He used the ancient world as a model to demonstrate that within the realm of free inquiry, two or more philosophies can exist peacefully. Just as the ancient world was strengthened through the exchange between the followers of

Plato and Epicurus, so Jefferson expected eighteenth century America to be improved in debate by science so as to prevent any possible future persecutions.

Since Jefferson's "Bill for the Establishment of Religious Freedom" is crucial to understanding how he put his philosophical observations about religion into a public document, it is important to quote it in its entirety. In 1779, Jefferson wrote:

A Bill For Establishing Religious Freedom

Section I. Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible [sic] of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone; that the impious presumptions of legislatures and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time: That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contribution to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and in withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an

additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependance [sic] on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing of any citizen as unworthy of the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours [sic] and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles or supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous falacy [sic] which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapon, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Sect. II. We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or minister whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious beliefs; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

Sect. III. And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.³²

Jefferson divided his bill into three sections. The first section established his contention that God intended religious faith to be based on reason rather than through coercion. When the legislature finally passed Jefferson's bill in 1786, they eliminated the first twenty-five words, so that while Jefferson wrote that he was "Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own free will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds,"³³ the Virginia assembly did not seem to share this assumption. Instead, they edited Jefferson's bill so that it began with the words, "Almighty God hath created the mind free,"³⁴

Another important phrase that was eliminated from Jefferson's original draft occurs immediately after Jefferson argues that God does not influence the mind of man through coercions "as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone"³⁵ The legislature eliminated Jefferson's use of the word "reason" so that the final bill read "as was in his Almighty power to do, that the impious presumption of legislators and

rulers"36 From this point, the bill was enacted for the most part as Jefferson had written it.

In his Autobiography, Jefferson discussed some of the changes that occurred in his bill for religious freedom. He recalled that his bill "met with opposition; but with some mutilation in the preamble, it was finally passed."<37 Aside from the alterations in the preamble, Jefferson was actually rather relieved that the bill passed as it did. He later explained how the legislature attempted at one point to change the bill so that it would only provide legal protection for Christians. Jefferson wanted to extend legal protection and religious freedom to all faiths and all creeds, yet he observed that "an amendment was proposed, by inserting the word 'Jesus Christ,' so that it should read 'a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion.'"38 However, Jefferson was pleased to note that the "insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of it's [sic] protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan [sic], the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination."<39

The next problem which Jefferson addressed in his bill was the issue of collecting taxes in order to support the churches in general. Jefferson rejected completely the argument that the morality of the republic could only be ensured through state support of the Christian religion. He

argued instead that the clergy should be supported through voluntary contributions by those who appreciate a particular pastor. In this case, a general tax would only hurt the cause of religion because the pastor "whose powers he [a believer] feels most persuasive to righteousness" would no longer receive "those temporary rewards" of monetary support, because the state would be in charge of redistributing the wealth rather than leaving such matters up to the people.⁴⁰

Another major consideration in Jefferson's bill was the argument that neither religious opinion nor governmental authority be allowed to regulate the free inquiry of the mind. The mind in search for truth in any field of inquiry must be protected from religious and civil authority. This was one of Jefferson's basic assumptions, and he also assumed that others would agree with his position when he argued that "our civil rights have no dependance [sic] on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."⁴¹ This was a radical proposition for the Virginia legislature to enact into law, for it struck at the very heart of the assumption that a republic must support religion in order to produce a society of virtuous and moral citizens. In his book, The Creation of the American Republic, Gordon S. Wood pointed out that no "state in the 1780's was willing to go so far in the search for religious liberty" as was Virginia. In fact, Wood observed,

"religious freedom and the multiplicity of denominations were coming to seem to some Americans actually incompatible with republicanism."⁴²

In rejecting the argument for a close alliance between the state and the Christian religion, Jefferson turned to history in order to demonstrate the harmful effects religious authorities have had in the past when civil authority was in their hands. Jefferson pointed out in his Notes on the State of Virginia that "Galileo was sent to the inquisition for affirming that the earth was a sphere: the government had declared it to be as flat as a trencher, and Galileo was obliged to abjure his error."⁴³ Even though Galileo was condemned in 1632 and forced by the Inquisition to recant his science in deference to the Ptolemaic earth centered views of the church, his life demonstrated to Jefferson that the powers of church and state must be kept separate, even in Virginia. Jefferson was confident that science and reason would win eventually in the name of truth, for he went on to observe that Galileo's "error however at length prevailed, the earth became a globe, and Descartes declared it was whirled round its axis by a vortex."⁴⁴ Jefferson noted that the government under which Descartes lived "was wise enough to see that this was no question of civil jurisdiction, or we should all have been involved by authority in vortices."⁴⁵

The bill for religious freedom represents Jefferson's arguments for complete freedom for the human mind, and places this freedom within the protection of the law. In Jefferson's opinion, a republic is made stronger through the separation between church and state because society generates better science and a more sincere religion without the force of governmental coercion. He once argued that "the Newtonian principal of gravitation is now more firmly established, on the basis of reason, than it would be were the government to step in, and to make it an article of necessary faith."⁴⁶ So, science as well as religion were to benefit from Jefferson's bill. He concluded his preamble with the argument that "truth is great and will prevail if left to herself"⁴⁷ And this statement would often be repeated in his correspondence and writings in a variety of forms, for it was an argument that was, for Jefferson, an article of faith.

The second section of Jefferson's bill for religious freedom is the part which actually accomplished the work of providing legal protection for individuals. While the preamble justifies the laws enacted in section two and provides the philosophical basis for the bill, Jefferson made legal protection for free religion a reality with the writing of eighty-five words. The bill does not provide a long list of grievances, nor does Jefferson mention any of the particular religious sects or denominations. Instead,

Jefferson freed the individual from being "compelled to frequent or support any religious worship." He also provided legal protection from any suffering due to "religious opinions."⁴⁸ Jefferson did not attempt to address any of the dissenters' concerns regarding matters such as the legal status of their marriages or baptisms which were conducted without the sanction of the Anglican church. But this was never his intention; instead, the bill was design to provide the framework within which such problems could be resolved in fairness and equality.

The final section of Jefferson's bill is interesting because it attempts to bind future assemblies from ever altering or repealing the law for religious freedom. While Jefferson acknowledged in section three that such a provision can have no real legal basis, he argued that if any future Assembly did "narrow its operations, [the bill for religious freedom] such an act will be an infringement of natural right."⁴⁹

In 1786, Jefferson was in France serving as foreign minister. When he received word that the bill for religious freedom had passed, he wrote to James Madison that the "Virginia Act for religious freedom has been received with infinite approbation in Europe & propagated with enthusiasm. I do not mean by the governments, but by the individuals which compose them."⁵⁰ Jefferson went on to inform Madison that the bill had been translated into Italian and French,

and he noted that "it is comfortable to see the standard of reason at length erected, after so many ages during which the human mind has been held in vassalage by kings, priests & nobles" ⁵¹ Regardless of the slight alterations which the legislature had implemented within the text of Jefferson's preamble, he was proud of the Virginia Assembly. Jefferson observed that it is "honorable for us to have produced the first legislature who had the courage to declare that the reason of man may be trusted with the formation of his own opinions." ⁵²

A key point in the understanding that men deserve to be "trusted with the formation of [their] own opinions" is Jefferson's assumption that reason will provide the foundation for rational opinions. Jefferson argued that Christianity had become corrupted when the simple, reasonable teachings of Jesus were infiltrated by the mystical incomprehensible teachings of Plato. Adrienne Koch has observed in her book, The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, that "Jefferson stressed the fact that primitive Christianity was free from mystery and asserted that the Judaic and Greek sources were responsible for the intrusions of the idea that mystery is that which transcends reason." ⁵³ With the introduction of mystery into the simple teachings of Jesus, the Christian religion became corrupted, in Jefferson's view, with an intolerant dogma that served to provide employment for the clergy.

Religion in a republic dare not be dogmatic because it must stay free to criticize and be criticized. Plato is a systematic philosopher whose system demands the realization of universal truths that are necessary; hence, Plato's philosophy is dogmatic and a-historical. Would Jefferson therefore argue that a student should never read Plato? The only answer to this question must be an emphatic no! For indeed, the only way to understanding the development of Christianity through the ages is through the process of historical study. In order to understand how, in Jefferson's view, the simple teachings of Jesus became the Platonic Christianity of the eighteenth century, the student must study Plato. In fact, the cornerstone of education for Jefferson was the study of the ancient world, and he would include Plato as a prominent part of that world. However, Plato must be studied within his own historical setting.

In fact, if one studies the ancient world, one must include Plato. His influence was such that it would be difficult to avoid him. Jefferson certainly read Plato, as did John Adams. Joseph Priestley wrote so extensively on Plato that it may be said that he was an authority. George Wythe was certainly a Plato scholar, and Jefferson considered him to be the best classical scholar in Virginia.⁵⁴ Although Jefferson would find much to criticize in the philosophy of Plato, especially the misuse of Plato, he never argued that Plato be ignored. The manner in which

Jefferson approached Plato can be seen in Jefferson's plans for the University of Virginia.

Just as he had consulted with Dr. Joseph Priestley on religious questions such as the influence of Plato on Christian doctrines, Jefferson also made Priestley one of his confidants when he considered founding a university in Virginia. In 1800, Jefferson wrote Priestley and expressed the hope that Virginia would establish a university "on a plan so broad & liberal & modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other states to come and drink of the cup of knowledge & fraternize with us."⁵⁵ Jefferson went on to draw up a list of subjects for the university, yet he excused himself by observing that the list was imperfect because "I make it hastily, and because I am unequal to the subject."⁵⁶

Jefferson suggested that the university provide instruction in "Botany, Chemistry, Zoology, Anatomy, Surgery, Medicine, Natl Philosophy, Agriculture, Mathematics, Astronomy, Geology, Geography, Politics, Commerce, History, Ethics, Law Arts, Fine Arts."⁵⁷ It should be noted that Jefferson did not include the study of theology in his curriculum. As for the professors in the university, Jefferson felt that they should "follow no other calling, so that their whole time may be given to their academical [sic] functions"⁵⁸

Nine days later, on January 27, 1800, Jefferson again wrote to Priestley in order to further discuss the importance of including the ancient authors in a university education. Jefferson told Priestley that "I think the Greeks & Romans have left us the present models which exist of fine composition, whether we examine them as works of reason, or of style & fancy; and to them we probably owe these characteristics of fine composition."⁵⁹ He went on to tell Priestley "that to read the Latin & Greek authors in their original, is a sublime luxury"⁶⁰ For this luxury, Jefferson remained thankful to his father who insisted upon his receiving a classical education, and he went on to tell Priestley that "I thank on my knees, him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything which I could then have acquired, & have since acquired."⁶¹

Jefferson also turned to John Adams when he was preparing his educational plan for the university. On July 5, 1814, Jefferson asked Adams which "particular sciences of real use in human affairs" he would include in a university, and how "they might be grouped as to require so many professors only as might bring them within the view of a just and enlightened economy?"⁶² Adams seemed a bit overwhelmed with such a request, for he replied on July 16, 1814, by saying:

Education! oh Education! The greatest Grief of my heart, and the greatest affliction of my life! To my mortification I must confess, that I have never closely thought, or very deliberately reflected upon the subject, which never occurs to me now without producing a deep Sigh, and heavy groans and sometimes Fears.⁶³

Even though Adams claimed to have thought little upon this subject, he went on to provide Jefferson with several suggestions regarding possible courses of study. Adams observed that "Grammar, Rhetoric, logic, Ethicks [sic], mathematics, cannot be neglected" ⁶⁴ As for the reading of the classical authors, Adams agreed that they were "indispensable."⁶⁵ Significantly, Adams volunteered the idea that theology be left to those who teach natural theology, rather than being left to the theologians, men such as Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁶ As for metaphysics, Adams said that he would just as soon leave such a subject "in the clouds with the materialists and spiritualists" ⁶⁷ Jefferson did not adopt Adams' suggestion of teaching theology within the school of natural philosophy. Since Jefferson viewed religious questions as essentially questions of simple morality, he decided to let the professor of ethics handle questions related to theology.

In 1818, Jefferson wrote a report for the Commissioners of the University of Virginia which outlined the purpose of the university, as well as its curriculum.⁶⁸ In his report, Jefferson referred to the establishment of religious freedom as the basis for not having a school

of theology within the curriculum of the university.

Jefferson argued,

In conformity with the principles of our Constitution, which places all sects of religion on an equal footing, with the jealousies of the different sects in guarding that equality from encroachment and surprise, and with the sentiments of the Legislature in favor of freedom of religion, manifested on former occasions, we have proposed no professor of divinity; and the rather as the proofs of the being of a God, the creator, preserver, and supreme ruler of the universe, the author of all the relations of morality, and of the laws and obligations these infer, will be within the province of the professor of ethics; to which adding the developments of these moral obligations, of those in which all sects agree, with a knowledge of the languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, a basis will be formed common to all sects. Proceeding thus far without offence [*sic*] to the Constitution, we have thought it proper at this point to leave every sect to provide, as they think fittest, the means of further instruction in their own peculiar tenets.⁶⁹

As Plato must be deleted from religious study, theology also should not be part of the general study in the university. Jefferson would relegate theology to a separate school where, he would argue, Plato must not be included. He was aware, however, that by eliminating the study of theology from the curriculum of the university and treating it rather as a subject of ethics, many would complain he was creating a university opposed to religion. In a letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper, Jefferson mentioned that there was a rumor circulating that "this is an institution, not merely of no religion, but against all religion."⁷⁰

In order to answer this accusation, Jefferson suggested that each religious sect be allowed to establish

its own school on the university grounds, yet remain independent and separate from the university. He thought that they could have their school ". . . so near as that their students may attend the lectures there, [the religious schools] and have the free use of our library, and every other accommodation we can give them; preserving, however their independence of us and of each other."⁷¹

Jefferson expected most of the sects to accept this offer, and he seemed to have a private hope that if he could gather all of the sects together and mix them "with the mass of other students, we shall soften their asperities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason and morality."⁷² For Jefferson then, the university was a place where reason could meet the followers of dogmatic mystical faiths, and in the process of socialization and education, the rigidity of their beliefs might be transformed into a religion that would be more sensible and humane.

The University of Virginia opened on May 7, 1825, and Jefferson considered it to be one of his most notable achievements.⁷³ His Plan for the University included a solid foundation of ancient history and the classical authors. Indeed, it seems that he hoped to persuade the religious sects into sending their students to the university so as to be enticed into the liberalizing influence of its library, where they would be able to trace

for themselves the influence of Plato's philosophy upon the Christian religion throughout history. The necessity of studying history was stressed by Jefferson in his attempts to establish education in Virginia. In 1817, he prepared "A Bill for Establishing a System of Education."⁷⁴ In this bill, Jefferson articulated the development of a full curriculum by stipulating that:

In the said University shall be taught history and geography, ancient and modern; natural philosophy, agriculture, chemistry and the theories of medicine; anatomy, zoology, botany, mineralogy, and geology; mathematics, pure and mixed; military and naval science; ideology, ethics, the law of nature and of nations; law, municipal and foreign; the science of civil government and political economy; languages; rhetoric, belles lettres, [sic] and the fine arts generally; which branches of science shall be distributed and under so many professorships, not exceeding ten, as the visitors think most proper.⁷⁵

The key to both Jefferson's acceptance and rejection of Plato is historical thinking. It is history that enables the individual to differentiate the past of the Greeks from that of Christianity. The history of the Greek world and the history of Christianity both need to be analyzed on their own terms. History is the framework in which human values are to be examined. In Jefferson's view, the values of the Christian world became rigid and dogmatic through the borrowed teachings of Plato's mystical doctrines. However, in the context of the ancient world, Plato's thinking is instructive. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson described the importance of history in Query XIV.

In this section, Jefferson stressed the importance of passing a law for the support of public education, but in particular he argued that:

. . . of all the views of this law none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people the safe, as they are the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty. For this purpose the reading in the first stage, where they will receive their whole education, is proposed to be chiefly historical. History, by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experiences of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.⁷⁶

Jefferson considered the clergy to be one of the primary groups whose ambitious designs needed to be revealed, and he hoped to one day see them defeated. He had, after all, expressed on more than one occasion the argument that the "Christian priesthood . . . saw in the mysticism of Plato, materials with which they might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment to their order, and introduce it to profit and pre-eminence."⁷⁷ However, Jefferson hoped, and expected, that through the proper study of history, "Platonic Christianity" would be eradicated. By studying the intellectual developments which have occurred through the ages, mistaken ideas can be traced back to their origins. In his study of history, Jefferson had discovered that eighteenth century Christianity owed more to the teachings of Plato than it did to the teachings

of Jesus. Therefore, he had termed it "Platonic Christianity."

Jefferson hoped that Christianity would one day be restored to the simple moral teachings of Jesus. This could only be achieved, however, after the roots of "Platonic Christianity" were recognized through the proper historical understanding of how ideas evolved and became linked together through time. Jefferson expected the work of purifying the Christian religion to continue, led by highly intelligent men charged with the vitality of youth. Jefferson concluded in a letter to John Adams in 1813, "We must leave therefore to others, younger and more learned than we are, to prepare this Euthanasia for Platonic Christianity, and its [Christianity's] restoration to the primitive simplicity of its founder."⁷⁸

NOTES

¹Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), 2:545-47.

²Thomas Jefferson, Autobiography, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 34.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Charles Ransdell Lingley, The Transition in Virginia From Colony to Commonwealth (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 190.

⁶Thomas E. Buckley, Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia 1776-1787 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 4.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Lingley, The Transition in Virginia, 191.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Jefferson, Autobiography, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 34.

¹¹Thomas Jefferson to the Members of the Baltimore Baptist Association, October 17, 1808, in Saul Padover, ed., The Complete Jefferson (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Inc., 1943), 537.

¹²Thomas Jefferson, "Testament" March 16 and 17, 1826, in Padover, ed., The Complete Jefferson, 1300.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Dumas Malone, Jefferson the Virginian (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948), 279.

¹⁵Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1302.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 15, 1814, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 2:433.

¹⁸Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 285.

¹⁹Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1308.

²⁰Thomas Jefferson, "No Politics in the Pulpit," an unsent letter, March 13, 1815, in Padover, ed., The Complete Jefferson, 953.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Jefferson, Autobiography, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 35.

²⁴Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 277.

²⁵Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 124.

²⁶Ibid., 284-85.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 277.

³⁰Paul Leicester Ford said Jefferson's notes were written "early in the revolution" and Julian P. Boyd said they were compiled before November of 1776. See Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The Works of Thomas Jefferson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), 2:92, and Julian P. Boyd, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1:529-30.

³¹Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Religion, in Ford, ed., The Works of Thomas Jefferson, 2:256.

³²Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 246-48.

³³Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," in Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 2:545.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Jefferson, Autobiography, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 40.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Jefferson, "Bill for Religious Freedom," in Boyd, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 2:545.

⁴¹Ibid., 546.

⁴²Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), 427.

⁴³Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 285.

⁴⁴Ibid., 285-86.

⁴⁵Ibid., 286.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 547.

⁵⁰Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, December 16, 1786, in Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 10:603.

⁵¹Ibid., 604.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Adrienne Koch, The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson (Massachusetts: Columbia University Press, 1957), 25.

⁵⁴Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, 68.

⁵⁵Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, January 18, 1800, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1070.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 1071.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, January 27, 1800, in *Ibid.*, 1072.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, in Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters, 2:434.

⁶³John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1814, in *Ibid.*, 438.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 439.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Thomas Jefferson, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia, &c." in Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), 248.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁰Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, November 2, 1822, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 1465.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Jefferson, "Testament" March 16 and 17, 1826, in Padover, ed., The Complete Jefferson, 1300.

⁷⁴Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education," in Honeywell, The Educational Work, 233.

⁷⁵Ibid., 241.

⁷⁶Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, in Peterson, ed., Thomas Jefferson: Writings, 274.

⁷⁷Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, in Ibid., 1342.

⁷⁸Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Ibid., 1302.

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