

**Monticello and the Flaming Chalice**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Makaanah E. Morriss**  
April 1, 2001

It was a spring evening in 1986, and there we were a group of Virginia Unitarian Universalists standing on the steps of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Charlottesville. We had gathered for our spring conference of Unitarian Universalists, a time to strengthen our connections, to reaffirm our liberal religious commitments, to know that we were not alone in our liberal faith and outlook in the relatively conservative state of Virginia.

We had just experienced a specially arranged candlelight tour of Monticello. As we walked through the rooms, and listened as the docents reminded us of the amazing scope of Jefferson's mind, his vision, and his accomplishments, it seemed as though one could almost feel Jefferson's energy and presence.

We closed the evening with a vespers service on the front steps. We used flaming chalice lanterns created by the church school students of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial U.U. Church in Charlottesville, as our sources of light. We had readings, sang some hymns and listened to a homily by a U.U. minister, Rev. John Wells, whose resonant voice seemed to have come from the colonial era.

There we were, religious descendants of Thomas Jefferson, offering to his memory a sense a gratitude and a renewed commitment to the religious principles in which he so firmly believed.

Thomas Jefferson was a Unitarian in his theology. We all know him as a statesman, an architect, a scientist, a plantation owner, a product and apostle of the Enlightenment, and a man of his cultural times. We may not be as aware of how important his religious search and his religious freedom were to him.

Theologically just as in other aspects of his intellectual and professional life, Thomas Jefferson was ahead of his time. As one author has pointed out, had he lived a generation later, he would have been more at home in liberal religious circles in New England amidst the Unitarians and Transcendentalists than anywhere else in America. (Malone, p. 42)

Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743 in Shadwell, Virginia at the edge of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. His father, Peter, was a surveyor first and then served as a burgess and county lieutenant. He is credited with making the first accurate map of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson had great respect for his father's map and from him may have acquired his zest for exploring and drawing and his liking for untrodden paths. (Malone, p. 11)

We do not know what exactly happened, but it appears that at some point before he turned 21, he experienced a religious crisis in the course of which he rejected his ancestral Anglican creed and embraced instead a vaguely defined natural religion. This religious transformation was apparently caused as Jefferson himself wrote from his inability "from a very early part of my life' to accept the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity owing to the "difficulty of reconciling the ideas of Unity and Trinity" in the godhead. (Sheridan, p. 15)

He then subjected the rest of Christianity to the test of rational analysis and concluded that its basic doctrines were simply unacceptable to an enlightened person living in the eighteenth century. He strongly believed that religion was a very personal and private experience, that religious freedom for each and every individual was the cornerstone of a truly enlightened democracy. (Sheridan, p. 19-20)

Each person, he decided had a natural right to worship—or not worship God as they pleased. And everyone must be free to decide for themselves the truth or falsity of the claims of a particular religion. His dedication to these

beliefs caused him to author the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1779. This statute set the standard for religious freedom not only in Virginia but eventually throughout the new nation as well. This act was so important to him that on the simple stone over his grave in the family burial ground at Monticello, he is described as he wished to be remembered, not as the holder of great offices, but as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia statute for religious freedom, and as the father of University of Virginia. (Malone, p. 48)

In this striving for religious toleration, as well as in his Unitarian theology and perspective on Jesus as moral teacher, Jefferson followed in the footsteps of Francis David, one of the earliest Unitarian theologians who died a religious martyr and whose words we read in our responsive reading.

Jefferson read extensively and found the works of liberal philosophers and theologians a great comfort on what must have been somewhat of a lonely religious journey for one born to Virginia landowners. He found affirmation from these colleagues of the Enlightenment for his view that the Bible was not the revealed word of God but merely a human "history" that he advised one of his nephews to read "as you would read Livy or Tacitus." Instead of being the son of God, Jesus, Jefferson believed, was only "a man, of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman Law."

For Jefferson, human reason, not supernatural revelation or ecclesiastical authority became the sole arbiter of religious truth. (Sheridan, p.17-18) Jefferson was a Deist in his beliefs about God whom he conceived of as a supreme being who created the universe and continued to sustain it by means of fixed, mathematically precise natural laws. This image of God is one of God the clockmaker, who created the universe, set it in eternal motion and then withdrew from direct intervention. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and many of the leaders of that era were Deists and so in this belief Jefferson had company.

From his study, Jefferson concluded that God had endowed each person with an innate faculty for distinguishing right from wrong. He believed that there was and I quote him "implanted in our breasts a love of others...a moral instinct in short which prompts us irresistibly to feel and succour their distresses." He believed that although such a sense was inherent in every person, it needed to be brought forth by education and example. (Sheridan, p. 19).

"Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion," Thomas Jefferson told his nephew. "Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."

For Jefferson, the best measure of the efficacy of any religion is the character of the moral and compassionate standards it instills in its adherents rather than the substance of the theological doctrines it teaches. As historian Eugene Sheridan writes, "Whereas in Jefferson's opinion dogma dealt with matters that were beyond human understanding and that historically had provoked bitter strife, morality regulated human relations in the social world to which [human beings] had been destined by nature, and had the potential to generate harmony in society." (Sheridan, p. 20)

Thus did Jefferson decide to go on a quest to find the true teachings of Jesus whom he believed to have been one of the greatest if not the greatest moral teacher. His was not really a quest for the "historical Jesus" as much as it was for an "intelligible Jesus," freed from the dogma and extrapolations of the Christian church.

On his journey, Jefferson discovered a friend and mentor in Dr. Joseph Priestly, noted English chemist and Unitarian theologian who had fled England due to public attack on his home because his political and religious beliefs. In particular Priestley's book, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, published in 1793, offered what Jefferson later said was the "groundwork" of his own view on this subject. Priestley and Jefferson became good friends and had an extensive correspondence. Priestley argued that Christianity was originally a simple religion that had been corrupted by the early church in a misguided effort to make it intellectually respectable to pagans and by later churchmen for the less edifying purpose of increasing their power over the laity. The essence of true Christianity, Priestley insisted, could be

summed up a few plain statements: There was but one God and he had given Jesus the special mission of revealing his true nature to the world and of teaching all people how to lead virtuous lives on earth so that they would be rewarded rather than punished in the life to come. (Sheridan, p. 26)

Jefferson did not agree with Priestley's acceptance of the divinity of Jesus and Jesus' miracles but otherwise he found in Priestley's work an affirmation of the views with which he had been struggling since he was a teenager.

Although Jefferson was very private about his religious views, his questioning of traditional Christianity in general and the divinity of Jesus in particular was well known and caused his political foes to label him as an atheist, an infidel and morally unfit to be elected to public office. Editorials castigated him. Pamphlets were published and widely distributed spreading these charges far and wide throughout his public career. Jefferson, who believed so deeply that religion should be primarily a private matter, must have been deeply hurt by such attacks.

Another mentor for Jefferson was Universalist leader, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a physician and humanitarian whose theology and social concerns paralleled Jefferson's own in many although not all ways. Rush appreciated the openness of Jefferson's mind and the breadth of his vision but was perturbed by Jefferson's rejection of the divinity of Jesus and by his unwillingness to more openly intertwine the Christian religion and the structures of democracy. Through many years of correspondence and dialogue, the two friends both grew in their understanding and Jefferson was able to claim that the compassion and morality taught by Jesus could serve as one of the basic foundations of the country's republican experiment.

Jefferson's search for the pure teachings of Jesus eventually led him to create his own version of the New Testament. His first attempt at this work was done quite quickly while he was still President. His ardor for the task caused him to be able to complete the first version in just a few weeks. He cut from the gospels those portions he believed contained the simple truth about Jesus' life and teachings and pasted this in a small book. This "wee little book" as he called it was for his use only although he did refer to it in his correspondence with Rush and a few select others. That he had gone as far as to create such a manuscript troubled some of his friends. To take scissors to the Bible seemed like a step too far.

Jefferson did not return to this endeavor until after he retired to Monticello. He and John Adams began a correspondence at that time re-establishing a friendship that had been long dormant due to political disagreements. Adams had learned of some of Jefferson's earlier attempts at distilling the true teachings of Jesus and he urged him to return to this task. And thus Jefferson began work on *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French and English*. Completed in 1820, it includes parts of the story of Jesus' life that Jefferson deemed historically accurate, and Jesus' teachings. Dropped are any of the miracle stories, statements by Jesus claiming to be the divine Son of God, and stories of the Resurrection. Jefferson's Bible ends with the crucifixion of Jesus and his being laid in the tomb. This book became Jefferson's personal source for religious insight and inspiration for the remaining years of his life. It was not published for the public. It was created as a testament and guide for his own spiritual journey.

While as the religious descendants of Thomas Jefferson we can rightly claim pride in the clarity of his theology, the compassion of his vision, and the justice in his stand on religious freedom, we need also to acknowledge and come to terms with the reality that he was a slave owner. Jefferson was a Virginia gentleman, a man of his times, who actually owned slaves from the time of his father's death when he was 14. The economy of Virginia was unfortunately built upon the institution of slavery. Jefferson inherited some land and acquired more land and more slaves through his marriage to Martha Wayles Skelton. He loved Martha dearly and she was to bear him six children, only two of whom, both daughters, lived to adulthood. Martha died in 1782 due to complications from childbearing and Jefferson was prostrate with grief.

As a young man Jefferson had come to the belief that slavery was fundamentally evil. While serving in Congress, he drafted the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which if it had passed as he presented it would have forbidden slavery in all the Western territory after 1800. But neither his stated belief nor his attempts at preventing slavery from spreading outweigh the painful reality that he was a slave owner all his life.

This is hard for us to imagine as Unitarian Universalists living in 2001. And yet Jefferson was so fiscally bound to a slave based agrarian economy that he could see no way clear of it. Similar to many of the Virginia landed gentry, he most often lived beyond his means. He kept very careful records of all expenses and income and yet his hospitality, his willingness to loan friends money and co-sign on notes for their business endeavors, left him usually in a very difficult financial situation. Might he have freed his slaves if his own economic circumstances had been robust? I hope so but I do not know.

We know that he did have long-term relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemmings. Sally was a young girl who along with her brother and mother arrived at Monticello as part of the legacy from Martha Wayles Jefferson's father. Sally and Martha were actually half sisters, as John Wayles had fathered them both. It was not uncommon for slave owners to father children with their slaves. It is said that Sally Hemmings and her brother were actually in the room when Martha died.

Sally was brought to France when she was fifteen to be an attendant to Jefferson's younger daughter who was joining her father during his work there as Ambassador. In France, which prohibited slavery, Sally Hemmings was a free woman. She learned French and enjoyed a level of freedom unknown to her before. It was during these years in France that her relationship with Jefferson began. It continued after their return to Monticello. They were to be the parents of five children over the years. At his death, Jefferson did ensure that Sally and her children became free.

The descendants of these children are only just now in our current time being afforded the respect and acceptance they have so long deserved. The extended family of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings have offered important contributions to their communities and it is gratifying that finally they are able to proudly and openly acknowledge their heritage.

I must admit that I wish that Jefferson had not been a slave owner. Slavery is in no way excusable. The UUA District that includes Virginia had originally taken as its name the Thomas Jefferson District to honor the liberal religious heritage which he nurtured. As our awareness of racism has been awakened during the last few years, that District is struggling with what name to choose. Should it drop "Thomas Jefferson" altogether? Or should it keep it and add to it the name of an African American Unitarian Universalist? The decision has not yet been finally made.

I would acknowledge Jefferson for all that he was – author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia statute for religious freedom, father of the University of Virginia, statesman, scientist, inventor, architect, religious seeker, husband, father, lover and slave owner.

Thomas Jefferson's belief in the unity of God, acceptance of the moral teachings of Jesus, reverence for Jesus as a great moral reformer, belief in the inherent ability of humans to act in compassionate ways, commitment to the need for religious freedom and toleration – these are roots which continue to nurture our liberal religious faith today. His gifts to us

were many. His human weaknesses were also very real.  
And we are a better people for his life here on earth.

So be it.