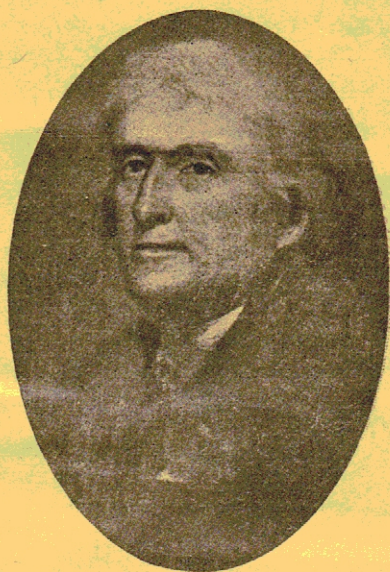


JEFFERSON THE FREETHINKER

By
JOSEPH LEWIS

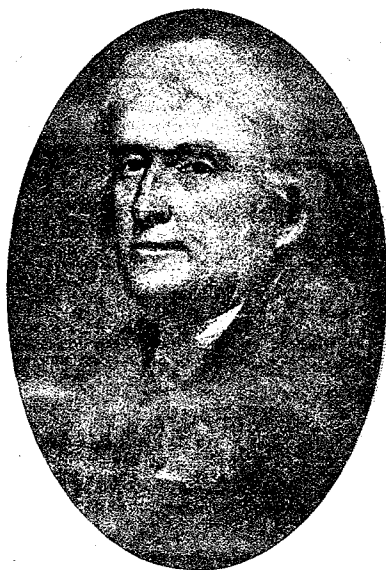


Th. Jefferson

FROM
SPENCER M. DETOLIER
LEADERS, PA.

JEFFERSON THE FREETHINKER

By
JOSEPH LEWIS



Th. Jefferson

Jefferson The Freethinker

By
JOSEPH LEWIS

Author of "The Tyranny of God," "The Bible Unmasked,"
"Lincoln The Freethinker," "Burbank The Infidel," "Franklin
The Freethinker," "Gems From Ingersoll," "Voltaire The
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Jefferson, The Freethinker*

By JOSEPH LEWIS

Heresy is still the greatest crime in the catalogue of man's misdeeds. You may be guilty of theft, you may be judged a forger, you may be socially and morally a brute and a reprobate, you may be a child beater and a wife deserter, aye, even a murderer, but with it all, if you are a religious believer, if you are "one of the fold," you may still have the respect of your friends, loyal supporters and heroic defenders. No matter how honest you may be, no matter how noble your character, or the loyalty of your bond and the sacredness of your word; no matter what intellectual achievements you may have attained, or accomplishments effected for the common good, if you are mentally above the rabble; if you have the courage of your convictions and exercise your prerogative of free speech and tell the world your honest thoughts; if you insist that ignorance and superstition should not usurp the throne of authority, you will be guilty of heresy, and conviction carries with it the stern sentence of ostracism.

It is needless for me to tell you, that of the men most responsible for the establishment of our Republic—both in principle and in fact—Thomas Paine stands in the very forefront; and that because of his heresy, because of the expression of his religious conviction, due recognition and a rightful place in the niche of America has been denied this author-hero of our country.

And on a par with Thomas Paine as one of the early patriots of the Revolution, and as a brother infidel, stands Thomas Jefferson.

*Address delivered at banquet of the Freethinkers' Society of New York on the evening of April 13th, 1925, at Hotel Belleclaire, 77th Street and Broadway, New York City, in honor of the 182nd anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson.—Also delivered over Radio Station W.C.B.S., October 8th, 1925.

Were it not for the fact that Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, and held high governmental positions in the Republic—from that of the governorship of a state to the presidency of the Nation—he would to-day be suffering from lack of recognition of his services in the cause of Freedom, to the same degree that the author of "The Age of Reason" and "The Rights of Man" has endured for more than 100 years.

The great triumvirate of America, the three men upon whose brows rest the glory of the conflict, one in actual military duty, and all three in the intellectual battle for independence—are Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson. Were it not for these three men, the Republic would never have been established and George Washington could not have been the first president of the United States of America.

Mighty may be your triumphs, noteworthy your achievements, honorable your conduct, spotless your character, but if you commit the unpardonable sin, if in religious matters you are a heretic, an infidel, an unbeliever, a freethinker, you will be, like Caesar upon his bier: "But yesterday, you might have stood against the world, but now lie you here and none so poor to do you reverence."

The passion of Jefferson's soul was Liberty. His torch burned brightly with the fire of freedom. He could not see man as Man until he saw him mentally and politically free. He knew that the oppression of tyrant kings and the shackles of slavery were the milder forms of subjection under which man was made to suffer. He knew that mental bondage, slavery to superstition and fear, was the greatest obstacle to the emancipation of man. Jefferson had vision enough and forethought enough and intelligence enough to know that when man became mentally free, the shackles of all other forms of slavery would inevitably fall from his side. Once man was emancipated from degrading and enslaving superstitions, once free of the fears of religion, then priests could not beguile him nor governments enslave him; and then prejudice, that poisonous viper of human life, would be obliterated forever.

The grandest law that was ever written upon the Statute books

of this or any other nation is the Statute of Religious Freedom which Jefferson drafted for the Virginia Constitution. Until the enactment of this provision for liberty of conscience, anyone who denied the existence of God, or the Trinity, or the Bible to be of Divine authority, was not permitted to hold civil or military office and was subjected to every penalty that an ignorant and vicious hierarchy could inflict. A father was even denied the custody of his own children.

But Jefferson knew that if the American Colonies were to prosper both as a government and as a nation, there must be a complete separation of Church and State. He knew that a church, supported by the State, was an enemy to man, whether it existed under a monarchy or under a Republic. The injustice was the same, and bloodshed and disruption would be the result.

For eight long and tedious years he faced the united opposition of ignorance and bigotry and entrenched superstition. He silently endured the vilification and calumny of his enemies; and when victory was won and the Statute of Religious Freedom was enacted, a new dawn and a new day brightened upon the land, not only for America, but also for the world.

The United States became the intellectual haven for mankind. And only a man of the mental grandeur of Jefferson could have conceived and developed and formulated so broad and so magnificent a provision for freedom of thought. What Thomas Paine did as an individual and as a citizen, Thomas Jefferson accomplished as an official and as an executive.

Jefferson believed in the aristocracy of the mind, but in the democracy of man. Some of the other leaders of the Revolution believed in the aristocracy of man and in the democracy of mind. They believed that a select few should be the leaders and the rulers of the masses, and that the masses should believe all that the leaders and rulers dictated. Jefferson believed that the masses should possess the power of government, and that the individual should be the master of his mind.

Washington and Hamilton, particularly, strove for the establishment of the aristocracy of government and went so far as to favor the establishment of a state church. Jefferson knew that as long as the church had the support of the state it would usurp the right to regulate the people's lives, and that all forms of despotism and tyranny, with their attendant horrors of persecution and torture, would follow.

Jefferson knew, and felt no hesitation in saying, that "millions of innocent men and women, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. "What has been the effect of coercion?" he asked; "to make one half of the world fools and the other half hypocrites?"

He did not want an Inquisition in America—he looked with horror upon those instruments of torture which had so torn and mutilated the tender flesh of man.

He knew that the church and the priests could not be trusted with the people's sacred rights of freedom, and said: "In every country and in every age the priest has been hostile to liberty, he is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own. It is error alone that needs the support of government. **Truth can stand by itself.**"

Armed with these facts and with undiminished courage, Jefferson defeated the efforts of Washington and Hamilton, and to his everlasting credit, to the everlasting benefit of this country, no state church was established. And were it not for Thomas Jefferson—and I say this after a full and thorough analysis of the facts at my disposal—this country to-day would not be a Republic.

Jefferson not only thwarted the efforts of Hamilton and others to establish a state church, but he also thwarted their efforts to establish an aristocracy. It was through the efforts of Thomas Jefferson that the first ten amendments, the very bulwark of our liberties, famous as the Bill of Rights, were incorporated in our Federal Constitution. It was Jefferson—equally as successful as

Lincoln—who preserved the Union; Lincoln from Secession and Jefferson from Aristocracy. One in an intellectual battle, the other in a military one. And, like Lincoln, during his political campaign, Jefferson had to contend with the accusation of being an Infidel.

The administration of Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, was from every viewpoint and angle, the most nearly perfect of any administration during the Republic's existence. He was president in fact as well as in name; in practice as well as in principle.

He did not fight for a principle, and then violate that principle to please the ignorant. His Statute for Religious Liberty was not a popular campaign issue. He cared more for intellectual honesty and the sacredness of his oath, than for social or political favors. He was not to be cowed by religious bigots who had done their utmost, by threats of vituperation, to silence his tongue and direct his actions.

When he took the oath of office he swore to uphold the Constitution and he was not to break his oath for the benefit of either the selfish, the ignorant or the hypocritical; and so he steadfastly refused, during his eight years of incumbency in the presidential chair, to issue a single religious proclamation.

In being true to his oath of office; in being true to the provisions of the Constitution; in being loyal to the principles of our secular government, Jefferson knew that he would incur the antagonism of the clergy; and in referring to the matter said: "I know it will give great offense to the clergy, but the advocate of religious freedom is to expect neither peace nor forgiveness from them."

In a further elaboration of his act, he laid down this premise, which might well be followed by our present-day executives: "I consider the Government of the United States as interdicted by the Constitution from meddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, disciplines, or exercises. But it is only proposed that I should recommend, not prescribe a day of fasting and praying.

That is, I should indirectly assume to the United States an authority over religious exercises, which the constitution has directly precluded them from. Every one must act according to the dictates of his reason and mine tells me that civil powers alone have been given to the President, and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents."

Not since the days of Jefferson has there been a president with courage enough to live up to the example which he so bravely and so valiantly established.

In keeping with the democratic ideals of the Republic, Jefferson dispensed with all pomp and ceremony with which his two predecessors had surrounded themselves. Jefferson was a Democrat in fact as well as in principle; in practice as well as in theory.

Jefferson was also a Freethinker, in deed as well as in thought; the philosophy of Rationalism ever illuminated his mind. He knew that there was no subject which pertained to the rights, the welfare and the liberty of man which should not be investigated. Age, nor the antiquity of a subject was superior to the interests of mankind. If, after an investigation of a subject it was found to be incompatible with the best interests of life, it felt the force of Jefferson's opposition.

In the volume of Freethought, where can you find the principle set down more clearly than in these words of Jefferson—"Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason rather than of blindfolded fear. Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others it will procure for you."

He admonished others to read the Bible as any other book; and if you found recorded therein instances inconsistent with facts, it was the facts which were to be accepted and the authority of the Bible rejected.

Jefferson himself is very explicit upon this phase of his investigation, and he says that Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament was "a being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust."

He was equally as emphatic concerning the prophecy of Jesus as found in the New Testament. He said, "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 classified with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

In a further investigation of the New Testament he found "a groundwork of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticism and fabrications."

"If we believe," he continued, "that he (Jesus) really countenanced the follies, the falsehoods, and the charlatanisms, which his biographers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) father upon him, and admit the misconstructions, interpolations, and theorizations of the father of the early and the fanatics of the latter ages, the conclusion would be irresistible by every sound mind that he was an imposter."

"Among the sayings and sources imputed to him (Jesus) by his biographers," continues Jefferson, "I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others again, of so much ignorance, of so much absurdity, so much untruth and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I therefore, separate the gold from the dross, I restore to him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some and the roguery of others of his disciples."

Many a Freethinker owes his emancipation to the reading of "Jefferson's Bible," the recorded human events of the Life of the Nazarene as Jefferson interpreted them.

Jefferson was not only convinced of the falsity of the religious dogmas of his day, but militantly struggled to break the grapple

hold they had upon the minds of the people, and was happy at every defeat they sustained. In a letter to John Adams, he wrote, "I join you, therefor, in sincere congratulations that the den of priesthood is at length broken up, and that a protestant Popedom is no longer to disgrace the American history and character."

And in response to a letter from John Adams saying, "That this would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it," Jefferson replied: "If by religion we are to understand sectarian dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on that hypothesis is just, 'that this would be the best of worlds if there were no religion in it.'"

Jefferson was a lover of Voltaire, a correspondent of Volney and an intimate companion of Paine. And we are constrained, in speaking of Jefferson, to mention with the deepest affection, the noble, the generous and the courageous attitude he assumed in sending an American vessel for the safe voyage of Thomas Paine when he sought to leave the shore of France and return to the land of his adoption for which he had labored so heroically.

One of the bravest sentiments ever breathed by man in public life was uttered by Jefferson. He said: "I have never conceived that having been in public life required me to belie my sentiments, or to conceal them. Opinion and the just maintenance of it shall never be a crime in my view, nor bring injury on the individual. I never will, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance. I never had an opinion in politics or religion which I was afraid to own; a reserve on these subjects might have procured me more esteem from some people, but less from myself."

To that end there was no hesitancy on the part of Jefferson in saying, "I am a Materialist."

In establishing the University of Virginia, Jefferson sought to accomplish in an intellectual sphere for the human race what he and others had accomplished in a political way for mankind. The University of Virginia was to be the counterpart, as an institution of learning, to the Republic.

There were to be no religious tests for pupil or professor, the sciences stood on a par with the classics and mathematics, agriculture and the science of the government were for the first time recognized as subjects worthy of a place in a university curriculum.

In establishing this great institution—the first truly secular college to exist in our land—Jefferson hoped to realize that longed-for and hoped-for day when there would be in reality, some semblance of the Brotherhood of Man.

Jefferson said: "By bringing the sects together, and mixing 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."

No wonder it was the proud wish of Jefferson that the stone about his grave should not only mention that he was the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, but also that he was the Father of the University of Virginia.

Despite his invaluable services in behalf of Freedom, despite his unceasing labors for the Republic, despite the everlasting debt the world owes him for his accomplishments, when this great Republican and champion of democratic ideals was elected president of the United States, when the day of his inauguration came to pass, newspapers printed borders of mourning and flags were displayed at half mast as a token of grief because an infidel was to sit in the presidential chair.

What was the reason for these signs of mourning, for these manifestations of grief? Were they displayed because a calamity was about to befall the Republic?

No. Because a calamity was not impending. On the contrary, during the administration of this infidel, the country more than doubled in size, and by the Louisiana Purchase laid down the principle of everlasting peace; as a nation we prospered beyond the wildest imagination of the most enthusiastic supporters, and

for the first time upon the face of the earth, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was a reality.

Not because he was dishonest, for he was not; not because he was deficient in administrative ability, for he was not; not because he was morally and intellectually unfitted to be President, for he was the best fitted and best equipped man in the country to guide the destinies of the Republic, but because he was an infidel, and only because he was an infidel, were the signs of mourning and the token of grief displayed by the clergy and their poor duped and deluded supporters on his ascendancy as the Chief Magistrate of the Nation.

When the time comes that the American people and the American Government depart from the principles of Jefferson, then it will be time for us as a token of grief to border our papers with the black band of mourning and lower the American flag to half mast, aye, with tears in our eyes, and our frames shaking with emotion, as though we are burying a loved one, we can pull down the American flag and with all the solemnity which the sacred emblem deserves, tenderly and silently fold it away, that the future may behold the symbol of Freedom, recount its glories, and mourn the death of the Star Spangled Banner.

When we depart from the principles of Jefferson, our Republic will have ceased to exist.

We cannot honor Thomas Jefferson more, we cannot more fittingly pay tribute to the memory of this great Statesman, Libertarian and Freethinker, than by living up to those high principles which he so nobly and so courageously wrote into the Declaration of Independence.

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