

University of Nevada, Reno

**He who loves the Workman and his Work improves It:
The Religion of
John Adams and Thomas Jefferson**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in History

by

Blakely K. Hume

Dr. Scott E. Casper/ Thesis Advisor

August, 2013

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

Blakely K. Hume

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Scott E. Casper, Advisor

C. Elizabeth Raymond, Committee Member

Thomas Nickles, Committee Member

Michael Branch, Graduate School Representative

Marsha H. Read, Ph.D., Dean, Graduate School

August, 2013

Abstract

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson proposed that in order for republican values to flourish in the republic virtue must be cultivated in society. They believed a reasonable religion was the necessary foundation to uphold this virtue. The letters they shared suggested a rationally critiqued faith that would provide the necessary foundation for the republic, one at odds with the rising evangelical religion so popular in the republic. The first goal of this project is to examine their correspondence to show how they used enlightened principles of reason and debate to provide an intellectual inquiry into the historical perversions they perceived in their “Christian” society. For Adams and Jefferson, a properly constructed religion emerged from a series of discussions about its content. The language that they used with each other revolved around three intellectual suppositions about religion. First, the essence of understanding religion, for them, was to examine and critique religious writers, materials, and doctrines. Second, such a critique led them to question specific points of religious doctrine and to determine the accuracy or inconsistency in their faith. Third, this questioning of doctrine led them to an enlightened, well-reasoned, and reformed religious belief.

While this study speaks to the current historiography and the “culture wars” regarding religion during the Revolution presently debated in American politics, it also provides the ancient and colonial religious context into which Adams’s and Jefferson’s discussion may be placed. Historians must recover the theological meaning behind the religious conversations these men had with one another to explain what they meant when they chose to define themselves as “Christian.” The process of recovering their faith by

contextualizing the correspondence of Adams and Jefferson is the second goal of this project.

By contextualizing their correspondence, historians may decipher Adams's and Jefferson's intentions about religion. The language they use in their letters demonstrates four things. First, they viewed themselves as "real Christians," not as "Deists" or "Unitarians" or "Atheists" as they have been labeled at various stages in their lives and by historians since. Second, they were willing—though privately and only with each other—to use reason and rationality as the basis for their faith. Third, having reason and rationality as the basis for their faith, they critiqued commonly held beliefs of "Christian" society at the time discovering many of those beliefs to be corrupt. Finally, these letters indicate what they believed was an accurate understanding of the religion of their culture without any doctrinal corruption. Interpreting their letters in this context Adams and Jefferson defined religion very differently in their era: they implemented revolutionary enlightenment thinking to reassess their religious beliefs to arrive at a "rational Christianity" which, to them, represented a "purified and enlightened Christianity." Both men understood that this religion was highly contentious and problematic. The faith that emerged was a very different and unorthodox "Christianity," one that would be wholly unrecognizable and unacceptable to not only their culture, but to the cultures that followed.

Dedication

For my unborn daughter, Quincy (October, 2013)

Your name emerged from the laborious writing of this thesis.

And

For Teenie

Thank you for your enduring patience over the last year of research and hardship;

I love you always.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my committee Elizabeth Raymond, Thomas Nickles, Michael Branch, and Martha Hildreth, for their encouragement and patience. I would especially like to thank my advisor, Scott Casper, for multiple readings of drafts and continually pushing me to excel and perfect my prose. I would also like to thank my mentor Gary Cage, for reading providing encouragement and enthusiasm. You have all made my experience at the University of Nevada, Reno an unforgettably memorable one. I will cherish these past several years and think fondly of you all.

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Introduction

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, having publicly devoted their lives to the creation of a nation and the preservation of the freedom upon which that nation stood. Their private correspondence was an expression of equal devotion to one another in the hopes, as John Adams stated, that they "...ought not to die, before We have explained ourselves to each other..."¹ Adams and Jefferson spent the last fourteen years of their lives discussing and arguing politics, education, the presidency, literature, leadership decisions, and philosophy with each other to understand their convictions. Over the past fifty years, from sources other than the Adams and Jefferson correspondence, American cultural and intellectual historians have elucidated these Revolutionaries' ideas and defined them as statesmen, diplomats, politicians, and intellectuals. However, upon further examination of the correspondence it becomes clear that Adams and Jefferson could also be seen as ardent men of faith.

While American Revolutionaries like Adams and Jefferson believed ideas could strengthen a nation, they also realized poorly conceived ideas would weaken it. In their letters, Adams and Jefferson expressed the importance of a rationally conceived faith the foundation of which would create a virtuous and stable republic. As Gregg L. Frazer states, Revolutionaries like Adams and Jefferson "stressed the importance of religiously based morality as a support for republican government."² Adams most clearly explained this point in a letter to his cousin Zabdiel when he suggested "...statesmen...may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone, which can establish the

¹ Adams to Jefferson, July 15, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 358.

² Gregg L. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 123.

principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue.”³ Jefferson expressed the purpose of a religious foundation in society differently suggesting that “the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree...and that we should not intermeddle with the particular dogmas in which all religions differ and which are totally unconnected with morality.”⁴ For Jefferson the different interpretations over theological doctrine had no bearing on morality, and government should not participate in religion except on principles so basic that all religions could agree. For Jefferson, the “moral branch of religion” provided a blueprint as to how to “live well and worthily in society.”⁵ For Adams and Jefferson religion was the most reasonable method to inculcate the morality upon which a government would thrive. That morality based on religion was the foundation upon which society must be based, both Adams and Jefferson agreed. Equally important to this foundation, was the process by which Adams and Jefferson arrived at this thinking: their desire to know truth led to an honest and rational critique of faith. The correspondence between Adams and Jefferson represents, in part, a quest to understand the true religion of the new republic.

The cherished friendship between Adams and Jefferson grew from a correspondence of 329 letters written over two distinct periods from 1777 to 1801 and from 1812 to 1826. The letters of the first period discussed political topics: trade, treaties, Adams’s and Jefferson’s activities as diplomats, European affairs, and the daily

³ John Adams to Zabdiel Adams, June 21, 1776, in *The Works of John Adams (Letters and State Papers 1799-1811)*, 10 vols., edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856), 9: 401.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson to James Fishback, Sept. 27, 1809, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 5 vols., edited by H.A. Washington (Washington D.C.: Taylor & Maury, 1853), 5:471.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, Jan. 21, 1809, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 12 vols., edited by Paul Leicester Ford (New York: Cosimo, Inc.), 11:89.

problems which pressed upon them while each held office. Throughout their time abroad and upon their return to America, Adams's and Jefferson's beliefs about the function of government diverged. This along with the political campaigning surrounding the election of 1800 and Jefferson's subsequent victory created a wedge between these statesmen. As a result, Adams and Jefferson had a falling out and exchanged no letters between 1801 and 1812. When the correspondence resumed in 1812— in large part due to their mutual friend Benjamin Rush's consistent suggestions— the content of the letters changed drastically and unexpectedly: more personal queries, discussions of literature and ancient history, reminiscing of the Revolution, their views on science and education, and discussions of philosophy.

Also unexpected was the manner and frequency with which Adams and Jefferson discussed religion and the conclusions they drew. In their correspondence Adams and Jefferson discussed topics immediately relevant to the culture of their day: from 1812 to 1814 they discussed the war and America's relationship with England; when Benjamin Rush died, they reminisced about the surviving members of the Revolution; they discussed the truth and relevance of one of the first histories of the American Revolution, written before they resumed their correspondence, by Italian historian Carlo Botta called *Storia della guerra dell' Indipendenza d'America*. Adams and Jefferson also used their letters to share matters more historical or intellectual in substance: the literature of Plato, Cicero, Newton, Thucydides, and the history of the early colonist Miles Standish; scientific topics like nature, planetary motion, and the nature of human beings; different perspectives on the French Revolution. When their letters fell upon the topic of religion, however, they became the most expansive.

They discussed the importance of the impending millennium, the ancient biblical justification for that belief, and the error they perceived in this justification. They critiqued early-nineteenth-century writings and ideas of figures like Tenskwatawa, Christopher McPherson and Nimrod Hughes who prophesied the millennium, and the errors those figures made in their prophecy. They evaluated Joseph Priestley's truths and inconsistencies in explaining the Bible. They assessed the Trinity and how Christians erroneously arrived at conclusions about this concept through centuries of dogma. They spoke of trans-Atlantic scholars from the German Idealist tradition in theology, such as like Swedenborg and Wesley, and the rational critique of scripture that they believed necessary for understanding religion. From 1812 to 1826 Adams wrote 108 letters to Jefferson, forty-eight of which concerned religion, often detailing history, doctrine, and meaning of religious concepts. In return Jefferson wrote fifty letters to Adams, seventeen of which referenced religion and which covered greater detail about history, language and context. Religion often comprised the majority of the content of Jefferson's letters, sometimes two full pages. Religion was also the topic to which the statesmen most consistently returned: Adams wrote thirty-five letters mentioned religion prior to 1816 after which he wrote two each year—excluding 1819 and 1826—until 1825. Prior to 1816 Jefferson wrote eight letters the content of which addressed the topic of religion for over three quarters of each letter. While this does appear slim, Adams and Jefferson exchanged the greatest number of their letters from 1812 to 1819—116 in all—as opposed to forty-two from 1820 to 1826. In these last six years, Adams wrote twenty-five letters to Jefferson, nine of which discussed religion. During the same time period

Jefferson wrote with greater frequency: seventeen letters to Adams four of which referred to religion at length (three quarters or more of the letter).

Religion, more than any other topic, made a consistent appearance in the letters of Adams and Jefferson. They argue about the aristocracy in 1815 but did not return to the topic again. They justified their administrations to each other in 1813 but not after. They provided letters of introduction in the early 1820s but not before. They dispute the merits of education in 1817 but not after. By contrast, discussions of the Millennium, prophecy, the miracles, the devil and Hell, the character of God, and the pure teachings of Jesus occupied their letters from 1812 to 1815. They muse about the afterlife in 1818 and 1822 and God and the concept of Spirit in 1820. In 1817 and 1818 they focused on freedom in religion and what was the “true” religion along with a rational and reasonable faith. While Adams and Jefferson are viewed as statesmen, policy makers, and politicians, rarely are they viewed as intellectual “theistic rationalists” critiquing faith and providing a defense of religion using their historical and biblical knowledge.⁶

By July 4, 1826, both men lay dying, Jefferson at Monticello in a painful state of consciousness and Adams, “bedfast and breathing with great difficulty, [fighting] to stay alive” at his home in Quincy.⁷ Jefferson died first at noon from uremia and pneumonia, while around the same time Adams awoke and with great effort proclaimed, “Thomas Jefferson survives,” then slipped into a coma and died.⁸ That these men passed away only a few hours apart only adds to the poignancy of the event. This was a relationship

⁶ With regard to religion, Gregg L. Frazer defines Adams and Jefferson as “theistic rationalists,” Revolutionaries who did not identify with any particular religion or church structure; Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders*, 14.

⁷ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 444.

⁸ Andrew Burstein relates this event suggesting that the accounts of what was said differ. See *America’s Jubilee: July 4, 1826* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 255-286.

strengthened by the close and intimate correspondence but preceded by a bitter estrangement. While the true meaning behind Adams' last words is forever lost to historians, the conversations Adams and Jefferson shared with one another in the last fourteen years of their lives more explicitly show articulated and well-reasoned ideas on politics, philosophy, and especially religion.

After receiving Adams's first letter of January 1, 1812, Jefferson quickly responded only days later. With that, the correspondence resumed. At the start of his first response to Jefferson, Adams saw his opportunity to comment on the progress in the American republic by discussing the speed of the postal system: "How is it possible a Letter can come from Mr. Jefferson to me in seven or Eight days," Adams wondered as "I had no expectation of an answer, thinking the distance so great and the roads so embarrassed under two or three Months."⁹ After that, Adams continued the intellectual discussion Jefferson began in his prior letter, ending the section tentatively, explaining that what he had sent Jefferson—two volumes of John Quincy Adams' works—he had sent "with some Anxiety submitted to your Judgment."¹⁰ While the rest of the letter answered in detail every topic Jefferson raised, to send Jefferson a personal object for critique was a sign of respect.¹¹ Whether Adams intended it or not, his "homespun" was an intellectual peace offering. The gift was an invitation to resume the friendship in the manner upon which it was built: upon intellectual respect, critique, and inquiry. Perhaps

⁹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 3, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 293.

¹⁰ In Adams's first letter of January 1, 1812, he told Jefferson he was sending him "two Pieces of Homespun" after starting the letter with "since you are a friend of American Manufactures." Jefferson, thinking Adams was sending him an American manufactured good, responded in his letter, about the state of America's manufacturing process, since the "homespun" arrived days later. See Joseph Ellis, "Friends at Twilight," *American Heritage* 44 (May/June 1993): 676.

¹¹ Such topics included: American manufacturing; the literature they both had been reading like Newton, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Acherly, Bolingbroke, De Loome, Harrington, Sidney, Hobbes, Plato Redivivus, Marchmont Nedham; the preservation of the Union; the last seven remaining members of the signers of the Declaration of Independence; and their health and age.

a connection to the American past—and Adams and Jefferson’s involvement in shaping it—was the catalyst needed to reestablish this friendship.¹² The correspondence continued with similarly intellectual issues, queries, solutions, and assessment. As it was Adams who initiated the correspondence, so it would also be Adams who broached another subject on February 10, 1812: religion. But Adams did not bring up simple religious issues from the early republic. The religious issues that emerged were ones that men of the Enlightenment, like themselves, were well suited to discuss.

Both Adams and Jefferson thought virtue was required for republicanism to thrive and religious liberty was that vehicle through which virtue would be inculcated in society. As an expression of such liberty, Adams and Jefferson critiqued contentious religious issues as they discussed religious writers of their era, questioned doctrine, recounted the history of Christendom, and spelled out the corruptions in the transmissions of the scriptures. Their letters represented their reformed view of religious faith. Jefferson went as far as to reconstruct what he saw as the early and most important teachings of Jesus, while Adams’s critique motivated Jefferson to continue such writings.¹³ Adams not only encouraged Jefferson but also provided his own meticulous and detailed queries regarding the religion of the era and of Jefferson’s ideas. Both men viewed religion in the early republic as lacking a consistent, rational basis. This type of

¹² Their usefulness in public politics had diminished, their independence had been preserved, and they were witnessing a rapidly changing Republic one example of which could be witnessed in a speedier mail service. Whether the Republic was changing for good or ill is the topic of another essay but this shift in society must have meant something to Adams and Jefferson enough, at least, to comment upon. Perhaps their letters served not only as the repair of an old friendship, but also as a recollection of the early days of the Revolution and of continued intellectual stimulation.

¹³ Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels: “The Philosophy of Jesus” and “The life and Morals of Jesus”* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

faith was dissimilar from evangelicalism, which was on the rise.¹⁴ Adams and Jefferson disapproved of “enthusiastic” and “energetic” evangelical faith, viewing it as a contributing factor to the continued corruption of true Christendom.¹⁵ Using enlightenment principles of reason, critique, and reform, their correspondence between 1812 and 1826 provided intellectual insight into the historical perversions they perceived in their “Christian” society and how those might be fixed to recover the true spirit of the Christian faith.

The “culture wars” that have emerged over the last forty years over religion in the Revolutionary era resulted from both academic and religious communities offering opposing arguments explaining the religion of the Revolutionary figures. But no historian in the last forty years has noted how much Adams and Jefferson discussed religion, what the content of their discussions was, and why they had them. Answering these questions by contextualizing the Adams-Jefferson letters might yield new information about Adams and Jefferson not just as politicians and intellectuals, but also as reasoned men of faith.

Historians such as Joyce Appleby, Gordon Wood, Jon Butler, Mark Noll, E. Brooks Holifield, Robert Ferguson, David Holmes, and Steven Waldman have suggested that the religious beliefs of the Revolutionaries were varied, difficult to determine, and unspecific. The historiography of religion in revolutionary America, as dominated by historians such as Martin E. Marty and Perry Miller prior to the 1980s, argued for a heavy

¹⁴ Mark Noll discusses evangelicalism and the popular Christian faith of the era in *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁵ Both Adams and Jefferson alluded to this in their correspondence with one other; see David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); chapters 7 and 8.

grounding in Puritanism in the colonial era. In the 1980s historians like Edwin S. Gaustad and Jon Butler posed that American religion was more complex than simply having emerged from a “Puritan heritage” and was in fact in a period of great growth during the Revolution. Subsequent historians like Kerry S. Walters saw the founders’ actions and practices as more consistent with the actions of “Deists” or “Unitarians,” while Christopher Grasso shows how deism tested America’s resolve for religious freedom.¹⁶ These last historians represent a departure from the more conservative view that suggested religion was central during the Revolution, arguing instead that religion was not as central for the Revolutionaries as previously suspected.

The debate over religion during the Revolution has not been limited to the academic community. In the last quarter of the twentieth century efforts to characterize the United States as a purely “Christian Nation” emerged as a response from evangelical Christians like Peter Marshal and David Manuel in *The Light and the Glory* (1980) and Peter A. Lillback in *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* (2006).¹⁷ More public figures from the evangelical right like Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson have argued that some of the prominent Revolutionaries were really “Orthodox Christians” or “born again Christians” and intended to establish a “Christian Republic.” The most recent argument, David Barton’s *The Jefferson Lies* (2012), attempts to expose the “all too common assumptions” about Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings, his anti-Christian tendencies, or his racist thoughts as “lies.”¹⁸ While the popular religious

¹⁶ See Kerry Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992) and Christopher Grasso, “Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95 (June 2008): 43-68.

¹⁷ Peter Marshal and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory* (Ada, MI: Revell Publishing Company, 1980); Peter A. Lillback’s, *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* (West Conshohocken, PA: Providence Forum Press, 2006).

¹⁸ David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

arguments and academic historiography are not in direct dialogue with one another,¹⁹ the fact that the argument over the religion of the founders is prevalent in 2013 demonstrates its importance.

The historiography since the turn of the twenty-first century has guided the conversation in another direction with historians like David Holmes proposing a revisionist view that the founders represented a mix of religious beliefs. In *Faith of the Founding Fathers* (2006) Holmes suggests that Deism had a profound influence upon the Revolutionaries and clarifies what exactly this concept meant during the Revolutionary era. The Revolutionary generation, he said, was comprised of “men and women ... [who represented] a diverse group theologically...composed of Deists and orthodox Christians” and who also maintained formal affiliations with “Christian denominations [while] questioning doctrines they believed could not be reconciled with human reason.”²⁰ He places the religious beliefs of the founders into three categories: “Non-Christian Deism, Christian Deism, and orthodox Christianity.”²¹ In searching out their faith, Holmes examines “which churches these men attended, how often” and “whether or not they took communion.”²² He suggests that the political figures of the revolutionary generation were a “mix” of their religious background, the culture of the enlightenment, and orthodox Christianity, and did not fit neatly into an explicit religious category. Holmes relies heavily on the term “Christian Orthodoxy” as a foil against which the “deism” of the founders can clearly be discerned. Holmes’s insistence on a normative

¹⁹ The popular religious argument does not express the same level of scholarly research that scholarly historians do and largely captures a popular, not a scholarly, audience.

²⁰ Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, 163.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

definition of Christianity deflects attention from the considerable role that Protestant Christianity played in the historical development of Deism and away from the founders' understanding of Christianity as a religion of nature and history. His categorization of the revolutionary figures not fitting into an "explicit" category says nothing as to whether the revolutionaries put themselves in an explicit category.

In *Founding Faith* (2006), Steven Waldman discusses the last thoughts of each of the Revolutionaries with respect to religion. Waldman cites Franklin's last words as his friend Ezra Stiles pressed him to summarize his "Christian Conviction." Waldman tries to show that Franklin created a "stylized Christian belief"—a type of Christianity very different theologically from what was popular at the time. Yet Waldman makes no attempt to explain Franklin's statement "...as to Jesus of Nazareth....I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, is the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see..."²³ He provides no further primary source, past letters, or treatises with exegesis to shed light on this statement.

No historiography of religion in the early republic is complete without the American Enlightenment. In *The Enlightenment in America* (1975), Henry F. May explored Protestantism as inseparable from the Enlightenment. As May suggested, the Enlightenment in America was not about the "Enlightenment and religion, but rather it was about the Enlightenment *as* religion."²⁴ Adams and Jefferson were products of this Enlightenment in America. Unlike Peter Gay, who defined the Enlightenment as a secular movement about skepticism and materialism, May proffers the idea that religion

²³ Ibid., 183.

²⁴ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xiii.

and enlightenment, in America, were connected.²⁵ In the 1740s the Great Awakening produced a form of exuberant, anti-intellectual popular Christianity that frightened Calvinist leaders in New England and drove them in the direction of moderate rationalism. May defined a second phase of Enlightenment, the “Skeptical Enlightenment,” which developed in Britain and France around mid-century. This phase, according to May, was the dominant tendency of the Enlightenment in France which questioned the Old Regime, especially its religious establishment. The third, more optimistic category of Enlightenment emerged from 1776 to 1800 in America, France, and Britain: the “Revolutionary Enlightenment” or “the belief in constructing a new heaven on earth from the destruction of the old regime.”²⁶ In Britain, this movement began as a revival of earlier Whig radicalism, a reaction to the complacency and corruption of British politics. In France and America, revolution cleared the way for the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine—champions of natural simplicity and enemies of all mystery, tradition, and authority. In the late 1790s, the “High Federalists” and the “New England clergy” joined forces against the “Revolutionary Enlightenment.” Their “counterattack” against the Revolutionary Enlightenment was largely successful in 1798-1800. Although the Republican Thomas Jefferson, not the Federalist John Adams, won the election of 1800, this political victory marked the triumph merely of Jefferson's moderate and contradictory version of Revolutionary Enlightenment and ushered in the fourth enlightenment in May's book, the “didactic enlightenment.” As May suggested, the election of 1800 marked the end of both the Moderate and the Revolutionary Enlightenment in America and witnessed a decline of the American Enlightenment.

²⁵ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969).

²⁶ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 153.

While May's charting of the Enlightenment defined specific historical categories, it said little about how such principles affected Adams and Jefferson.

Jay Fliegelman responds that May neglects to address the ideology and values popularized by the most widely read literary and educational works of the period. Fliegelman, instead, creates a new narrative of the revolutionary era, in which the Revolution was a releasing of the old bonds of filial authority—England—and in doing so American elites created new meanings behind authority through new standards of theology while relations between divine and civil liberty was strengthened.²⁷ Robert Ferguson writes in *The American Enlightenment, 1750 – 1820* (1994): “Revolutionary writers often express their thought in spiritual terms as Adams himself expressed [when he said] in 1776 that ‘religion and morality alone...can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand.’”²⁸ Rather than determining context for this statement, however, Ferguson explains an apparent contradiction in Adams's writings. He suggests that “the same Adams will insist that American Government has its beginnings in the ‘natural authority of the people alone, without pretence of miracle or mystery.’”²⁹ Ferguson's argument does not explain Adams's personal disdain for religious enthusiasts, nor how this particular statement referred to organized enthusiastic churches, nor religion in general. Adams and Jefferson used the principles of enlightened thought to continue their dialogue about religious issues in the new republic. To

²⁷ Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁸ Robert Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 77-78, 41-42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

understand Adams's and Jefferson's religion, it is important to explain how eighteenth-century religion laid the groundwork for their letters.

Mark Noll and E. Brooks Holifield provide two perspectives on the religious context after the Revolutionary era. In *America's God*, Noll explains how the American religious narrative shifted away from "European theological traditions...and toward Protestant evangelical theology [which was] decisively shaped by its engagement with Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America."³⁰ Noll describes how American theologians contributed to the new nation by providing religious support to "republican themes." He argues that "American Protestant thinking, the dominant American theology between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, eventually gathered evangelical Christianity, republican political ideology, and common sense moral philosophy into a synthesis that rendered the American Protestant perspective altogether pertinent to the American republic but made that perspective as different from the Protestantism of the Reformation as Reformation Protestantism was different from Roman Catholicism."³¹ He argues for no single American Theology but instead sees theology going through the process of "Americanization."³² In comparing the Revolutionary figures to the rising evangelicalism of the early Republic, Noll offers a more specific category of religiousness to the Revolutionary figures. "The founders who mattered most" –figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and James Madison—"were either so reticent about their own religious convictions or so obviously deistic as to

³⁰ Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid*, 3

³² *Ibid*, 5, 3.

represent positive opposition to evangelicalism.”³³ Holifield’s *Theology in America* (2003) suggests that “American theological reflection...engaged American writers from multiple religious backgrounds in a vast conversation” linking them to a trans-Atlantic world.³⁴ Holifield points to how rationalism and evidentialism played a crucial role in justifying a rational Christian system during the early republic connecting Christian thought to empirical and rational knowledge.³⁵ Religious practitioners and thinkers in Revolutionary America “shared a preoccupation with the reasonableness of Christianity” which made this evidentialist practice of theology very controversial. Holifield surveys the beliefs of divines, pastors, and theologians during the era of the new Republic and defines the relations between Christian thought and non-theological discourses.³⁶

Complementing these two works, John G. West’s *The Politics of Revelation and Reason* (1996) suggests somewhat of a consensus regarding their religious beliefs of the Revolutionary figures. All were committed to freedom of conscience, thinking that a separation of church and state would guarantee that “civil government no longer had any legitimate weapons with which to fight religious battles.”³⁷ Evangelicals and Anti-federalists of the early Republic felt a moral citizenry was crucial to achieve the utopian, republican experiment. Yet they tended to promote revelation, not reason, as a source for morality. They considered piety to be an essential quality in those who would live the best moral lives. West shows the range of opinions and convictions among the Revolutionaries of the new nation, even as they all shared an “attachment to religious

³³ Ibid, 164.

³⁴ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

³⁵ “Evidentialism” is defined as a theory of justification where the justification of a belief depends solely on the evidence for it.

³⁶ Ibid, 6.

³⁷ John G. West Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 74.

liberty.” While West is a political scientist and not an historian, he does show how evangelicals used arguments and methods to advance their agenda for a Christian America during the early nineteenth century. West concludes that Franklin, Adams and Jefferson were all considered either Deists or Unitarians, that they did not rule out public activities by more traditional believers, and that all of them wanted to promote religious liberty in the new Republic.³⁸

Most recently Gregg L. Frazer has responded to Noll, Holmes, and Waldman by categorizing the religion of the Revolutionaries. Frazer is cognizant of the culture wars as well as the academic historiography which play a role in this conversation about the faith of the Revolutionaries. He finds a middle ground, suggesting that Adams and Jefferson were not deists or orthodox Christians but instead adhered to a system he labels “theistic rationalism... a hybrid belief system mixing... natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism...”³⁹ Frazer proposes a definitive solution to resolve the “culture wars”: the Revolutionaries were a different kind of Christian. Frazer examines the process by which Adams and Jefferson critiqued their religion—“theistic rationalism”—recognizing a significant “impact on the Founders from both secular and Christian influence.” He admits that historians like Alan Heimert and Alice Baldwin wrote the definitive works on “theistic rationalism” while other historians including Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden have contributed to this perspective of rational faith.⁴⁰ Frazer points out that three other historians—Sidney Mead, Cushing Strout, and Sydney Ahlstrom—have

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders*, 14.

⁴⁰ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); Alice Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958).

recognized that a new belief system was created out of the rationalism of the Enlightenment combined with Christianity.⁴¹ Frazer suggests that it was meaningless for someone in the early Republic like Jefferson to describe “his religion as rational Christianity because his description was based on his own personal definition of Christianity, which did not comport with the way every major church defined it.”⁴² This was exactly Adams and Jefferson’s point. Both felt that the “authoritative church” had defined its religious precepts incorrectly. Jefferson’s description of religion was not based on a “personal definition of Christianity,” but rather on ancient history, philosophy, and criticism.

The historiography has accomplished much in trying to determine the faith of the Revolutionaries. As a whole, however, it fails to address a few simple questions. Did Adams recognize his own “Unitarianism?” Or did he—in explicating his faith to Jefferson—speak about religion as a Unitarian would? Similarly, does Jefferson recognize his “atheist” tendencies as the public suggested during his presidential campaign? Or does he admit to practicing any faith at all? What were the meanings behind Adams’s and Jefferson’s arguments on religion and what did these particular Revolutionaries say about their faith? Most important, what is the intent behind their words: do their words tell us something about their conception of religion? Adams and Jefferson saw theological corruption in the Bible leading people to a false understanding and therefore basis, of faith. Their rationally conceived religious and moral thought differed greatly from that of the masses. But this does not mean, necessarily, that they

⁴¹ Sydney Mead, *The Old Religion in the Brave New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁴² Frazer, *Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders*, 132.

were “Deist,” “Unitarian,” “Atheist,” “Orthodox Christian,” or even “Theistic Rationalists.” These are all still labels to which none of the Revolutionaries assent. To some extent every historian creates categories into which he or she places historical figures. Yet these modern categories would be more fully defined by articulating the categories into which these historical figures placed themselves.

One such example of Noll’s “Americanization of religion”—of critiquing evangelical Christianity, republican political ideology, and common sense moral philosophy and synthesizing them into an American Protestant perspective on religion—is found in the Adams and Jefferson correspondence. Yet Noll interprets Adams’s and Jefferson’s words differently suggesting that Adams and Jefferson were “so reticent about their own religious convictions” and “so obviously deistic as to represent no positive opposition to evangelicalism.”⁴³ In one sense he is correct: Adams and Jefferson were not representative of the “evangelical surge” which Noll examines, nor did either approve of or support “enthusiastic” religion. However, Noll is incorrect to suggest they were “obviously deistic.” While Adams and Jefferson were not evangelicals, they considered themselves “Christian,” even if their definition demonstrated new, rational, unorthodox, and enlightened religious thinking. Frazer most closely describes the method—“theistic rationalism”—by which all the Revolutionaries—Adams and Jefferson included—determined their faith: a rational, reasoned, question-filled analysis of faith analyzing scripture and popularly held Christian beliefs to determine their historical and philosophical validity. But this was a method, not a category, and it was not the label by which Adams and Jefferson would have called themselves.

⁴³ Ibid., 164.

Historians must recover the theological meaning behind the religious conversations these men had with one another to explain what they meant when they chose to define themselves as “Christian.” The process of recovering that faith is, in part, one goal in contextualizing the correspondence of Adams and Jefferson. They used the process of “theistic rationalism”—as Frazer has called it—to arrive at certain conclusions about their faith. This system can be seen, throughout their letters, in three ways. First, the essence of understanding religion, for them, was to examine and critique religious writers, materials, and doctrines. Second, such a critique led them to question specific points of religious doctrine and to determine their accuracy or inconsistency in their faith. Third, this questioning of doctrine led them to an enlightened, well reasoned, and reformed religious belief. Adams’s and Jefferson’s letters were a conscious effort to reassess the Christian faith of the early republic. This study examines and explains the content and context of those letters to demonstrate how both men rationally critiqued religion in the early Republic to create a more “enlightened,” “pure” faith they believed to be closer to the original teachings of Jesus. While this study speaks to the current historiography and the “culture wars” regarding religion during the Revolution presently debated in American politics, it also provides the ancient and colonial religious context into which Adams’s and Jefferson’s discussion may be placed.

American historians of the last forty years have committed the same error propagandists and newspapers during the election of 1800 made with respect to Adams and Jefferson and their faith: they are guilty of committing the “fallacy of either-or.” The current historical debate suggests both Adams and Jefferson were orthodox Christians or they were un-Christian. In the election of 1800 Federalists capitalized upon

Thomas Jefferson's apparent lack of religious conviction in the Christian faith. A South Carolinian pamphlet went so far as to say "Jefferson abhors the Christian system," while a newspaper asked voters to ask themselves: "Shall I continue in allegiance to God—and a religious President; Or impiously declare for Jefferson—and No God!!!"⁴⁴ Similarly, John Adams suffered greatly over his religious convictions and his "Unitarian" sentiments at other moments in his life. Religious historians have viewed the actions and words of figures like Adams and Jefferson as defining their "irreligious-ness or non-Christian" beliefs ever since. However another question exists which historians have yet to consider: what were Adams and Jefferson doing in their letters and what did they say about themselves? They were justifying, explaining, and reassessing their "faith," one that, by the time they found themselves writing in 1812, they were not willing to share with the American public because they knew how unorthodox that faith was.⁴⁵ To understand the merit of what Adams and Jefferson said about religion, they must speak for themselves about their religious ideas.

On Nov 4, 1816, Adams discussed the corruptions of the church, how Christianity should be purified, and how it would be better "to apply these pious Subscriptions, to purify Christendom from the Corruptions of Christianity; than to propagate those Corruptions in Europe..." He saw it best to purge Christianity of its corruptions. Then he clarified after what seemed to be some disparaging remarks about Christianity:

"Conclude not from all this, that I have renounced the Christian Religion...Far from it. I

⁴⁴ This and the story of religion during the election of 1800 from the essay by Rob McDonald, "Was There a Religious Revolution of 1800?" in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race and the New Republic*, eds. James P. P. Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 173-198.

⁴⁵ On five different occasions Adams and Jefferson discussed the opportunity to publish their correspondence when a few administrators in the postal system noticed their frequently exchanged letters. Neither was interested, both citing their "religious ideas" among other ideas as issues they dared not share with America.

see ...something to recommend Christianity in its Purity and Something to discredit its Corruptions.”⁴⁶ Adams and Jefferson questioned the accepted interpretation of the Bible in the same manner by which they critiqued the religious writers of their era: employing a rational and well-reasoned guide of analysis. Later in the letter Adams admitted that “the 10 Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my religion.” He was being indirect but still straightforward enough in his belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The clearest statement from Adams, however, came on September 14, 1813: talking about God and the creation of the universe, he railed against “ye Calvinistick! Ye Athanasian Divines!” who questioned his sincerity and belief in the Christian faith. “Ye will say, I am no Christian:...” Adams extorts, “...I say Ye are no Christians....yet I believe all the honest men among you, are Christian in my Sense of the Word.”⁴⁷ Adams even defended Jefferson’s faith in a letter on July 16, 1813. Adams recounted how Priestley was uncertain about Jefferson and his faith calling him an “unbeliever.” Yet in the next sentence Adams told his friend “...you are as good a Christian as Priestley and Lindsey.”⁴⁸ Mostly clearly, in a letter to Benjamin Rush, Adams wrote: “...the Christian religion...is the brightness of the glory and the express portrait of the character of the eternal, self-existent, independent, benevolent, all powerful and all merciful creator, preserver, and Father of the universe, the first good, first perfect, and first fair..... Ask me not, then, whether I am a Catholic or Protestant, Calvinist or Arminian. As far as they are Christians, I wish to be a fellow disciple with them all.”⁴⁹ Adams truly believed the

⁴⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 4, 1816, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 494.

⁴⁷ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Sept. 14, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 372.

⁴⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 359.

⁴⁹ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 26, 1796, in *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols., edited by L.H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 2: 285.

attitude and behavior in faith mattered most. As he wrote “He who loves the Workman and his Work, and does what he can to preserve and improve it, shall be accepted of him.”⁵⁰

Jefferson’s words about his faith were equally poignant. In 1817 he told Adams that a biographer “enquired of me lately...whether he might consider as authentic, the change in my religion much spoken of in some circles. Now this supposed that they knew what had been my religion before, taking it for the word of their priests, whom I certainly never made the confidants of my creed. My answer was ‘say nothing of my religion. It is known to my god and myself alone.’”⁵¹ If the importance of Jefferson’s belief in the “Christian system” is not compelling enough for historians, along with the compilation of Jesus’s teachings, Jefferson did have words for the atheists. In a letter on August 15, 1820, Jefferson mentioned “God and spirit” and what they were as substances and then asked, “who are the real ‘schismatists’... merely atheists, differing from the material theist only in their belief that ‘nothing made something.’”⁵²

In deciphering their letters, Adams and Jefferson were contributing to an ongoing but private conversation about religion and faith. At times they critically responded to the writings of such religious writers of the day as “Lindsay, Disnay, Farmer, Price, Priestley and Kippis.”⁵³ Their private conversations pointed out valid and invalid points of these writers as their theological discussions reflected a critique and assessment of concepts in popular Christianity they perceived as “heretical” and “corrupted.” One such example was how the doctrine of the Trinity could not be substantiated and was therefore

⁵⁰ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 310.

⁵¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Jan. 11, 1817, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 505.

⁵² Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 15, 1820, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 568.

⁵³ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 29, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 325.

false. The miracles as empirical events were suspect for these men. Both men had suspicions about the coming millennium and where such biblical scripture was found in the Bible. They viewed Genesis as allegorical and not literal, and neither believed in a Hell filled with eternal conscious torment. They believed the Bible should be read rationally with its scripture questioned. They found difficulty in determining the character of God.

By contextualizing their correspondence, historians may decipher Adams's and Jefferson's intentions about religion. The language they use in their letters demonstrates four things. First, they viewed themselves as "real Christians," not as "Deists" or "Unitarians" or "Atheists" as they have been labeled at various stages in their lives and by historians since. Second, they were willing—though privately and only with each other—to use reason, rationality, and even science to explain their faith. Third, they used reason and rationality as the basis for their faith, from which they critiqued commonly held beliefs of Christian society at the time.⁵⁴ Finally, these letters indicate what they believed was a true understanding of religion without any doctrinal corruption. Interpreting their letters in this context, they intended something unexpected for the time: they implemented revolutionary enlightenment thinking to reassess personal views of Christianity and to arrive at a new "rational Christianity" which, to them, represented a "purified Christianity."⁵⁵

⁵⁴These topics are too numerous to demonstrate: the miracles, Jesus himself, character of Jesus, understanding Revelation, the critique of the coming millennium, miracles during the middle ages, inspiration, the character of God, the causes of the universe.

⁵⁵In several instances Jefferson asks Adams to not share specific letters or outlines defining his personal faith and Adams goes to great pains to comfort Jefferson that none of their letters will be seen by others and that he should continue to write on the subject of religion. For the specific subject of these letters see Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams: June 15, 1813, 331; Aug. 10, 1815, 452-453; Aug. 22, 1813, 367-369;

While Adams and Jefferson's presentation of subjects in their letters was scattered and unfixed, the conclusions they drew were specific. Those conclusions represented an enlightened view about how to address and critique theological and religious issues. Adams and Jefferson were doing more than simply having a religious discussion. They returned to many topics covering a wide basis of theological inquiry. Adams and Jefferson, in their letters, sought to redefine their understanding of the "Christianity" through the process of enlightened critical analysis of doctrine and faith. They aimed to restore their faith to what they thought were the original teachings of Jesus. In doing this, they saw and labeled themselves as "true Christians" who believed in God and the teachings of Jesus, and did not subscribe to the confused faith, filled with the false doctrines, that was so prevalent in Christian thought of the new republic.

Chapter 1: Prophecy and Millennialism

In their correspondence Adams and Jefferson discussed a range of issues occurring in the new American republic: governmental policies, American manufacturing and industry, commercial relations with England and France, the war with England, and the increasingly common push toward a self-interested democratic society.¹ From 1812 to 1826 their letters followed no specific trajectory or organization, yet the topic of religion more consistently emerged than other subjects. While every letter addressed prior queries, both men returned to religion in a variety of ways: as an historical inquiry, through religious literature, through religious claims about each other, in philosophical claims about religion, and in brief statements. Adams typically broached the religious issue, asking questions and offering his opinion, while Jefferson answered the inquiries. Between 1812 and 1815 some of those discussions involved a critique of religious writers of the day along with exegesis of scripture. It was in these years that their deepest and most philosophical questions about politics and religion emerged. Although the election of 1800 had occurred twelve years earlier, the public's questioning of Jefferson's religious faith and character left a mark on the former president.² Whether Adams knew this or not was unclear as he made no specific mention of the results of the

¹ While it is outside the scope of this thesis, several historians have argued for the changes taking place in American culture at this time. The arguments are extensive but all point to the change in the political, cultural, and economic climate of the American republic. See Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

² For greater detail on this see John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Robert M.S. McDonald, "Was There a Religious Revolution of 1800?" in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race and the New Republic*, edited by Jan Ellen Lewis, Peter S. Onuf, & James P. Horn (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 173-198.

election. Adams did, however, know of Jefferson's promise to Rush explaining his personal views on Jesus and he encouraged Jefferson in their letters to explore the subject. Just as Adams resumed the correspondence on January 1, 1812, Adams would also first address the topic of religion on February 10, 1812. He did so tentatively by addressing an issue then prominent in American religion: prophecy and the related coming of the millennium. These as well as other religious issues had important historical backgrounds about which Adams and Jefferson were well versed. Even more important, these issues possessed contemporary significance in the culture of the Revolution and the early republic.

Millennialism, a wide range of beliefs about the second coming of Christ or the coming of a new religious age, had historical roots as far back as the second century.³ This event was to take place prior to the final judgment—or Apocalypse—and the future eternal state of the Christian world to come.⁴ The concept was interpreted from specific lines of scripture, such as one found in Revelation stating that the “serpent, who is the Devil and Satan” will be bound “for a thousand years” and thrown into a pit so that he will not “deceive the nations...till the thousand years [are] ended.” The scripture continues to describe the loyal followers of Christ who would “reign with Christ a thousand years” while the “rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years

³ “Millennium” is Latin for 1000 years or from the Greek “chiliasm” *khiliasmos* (κίλιασμος) from *khilioi* (κίλιοι) meaning a thousand. The concept developed as an early Christian belief held by the Church which described a future state of Christian utopia, where Christ would reign for one thousand years on earth. Historically this belief was not held by the earliest followers of Jesus but instead emerged in the middle of the second century; Millenarianism and Millennium are also synonymous; *New International Bible Dictionary*, edited by J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 568-569.

⁴ An apocalypse (*apocalypsis*- ἀποκάλυψις), is, in this case, a religious disclosure of knowledge, previously hidden from the world in and the triumph of good over evil along with the completion of the present age, usually incorporating some eschatological, or end time, scenario; *New International Bible Dictionary*, edited by J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 67.

were ended.” This passage represented not the end of the world but the end of an age just prior to the “New Earth” under God’s kingdom.⁵

Papias (c. 70-c. 155), an early Christian writer, was a “faithful follower of the apostle John” and one of the earliest advocates of this teaching suggesting thinking it to be part of the true teachings of the apostles.⁶ A chiliastic view of a Messianic kingdom, as interpreted by Revelation 20, was another powerful interpretation. Early church figures like Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225 A.D.), Irenaeus (130-202 A.D.), and Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.) made explicit references to the thousand year “physical” reign of Christ.⁷ Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Christian writers, believed in a “pre-millennial” interpretation of the scripture, thinking that he and other “right-minded Christians . . . are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built. . . .”⁸ The late second century Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus, wrote his *Against Heresies* in opposition to Gnosticism of the second century and supported pre-millennialism, arguing for a physical earthly kingdom that would be required for God’s covenant with Abraham, his “inheritance of the land . . . [which] . . . , Abraham did not receive” in his lifetime.⁹ However, as Philip Schaff suggests, these interpretations of scripture were not the accepted doctrine of the early church, “but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers” of the era.¹⁰ Others, such as Caius, Origen, Dionysius

⁵ These three quotations from Revelation 20: 1-6 constitute the primary focus in the New Testament for the belief in the coming millennium; it is a misinterpretation that statements such as the one found in Revelation—which represent eschatological literature—must only refer to the end of the world.

⁶ Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, was one of the earliest Christians, writing in the first third of the second century, and espoused such a belief.

⁷ David A. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 448-453.

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press), chs 31-47.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. John Keble (Oxford: Nashotah House Press, 1872 [reprint 2012], 5.32.

¹⁰ Some who supported this view were Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.

the Great, Eusebius, Jerome and Augustine opposed this interpretation.¹¹ Yet as the church developed through the fourth century, many other interpretations emerged about the concept of the millennium.

Eusebius (263-339 A.D.), an early Roman historian, Christian apologist, and scholar of the biblical canon, known as the Father of Church history, rejected the interpretation of the coming of the Millennium believing Papias's interpretation of Christ's millennial reign was something he had "... imagined, as if they were authorized by the apostolic narrations, not understanding correctly those matters which [the apostles] propounded mystically in their representations."¹² For Eusebius, the ecclesiastical writers who believed in a literal millennium had embellished the scripture.¹³ Eusebius promoted an allegorical interpretation of the book of Revelation contrary to the literalist interpretation regarding such literal interpretations of Revelation as having "small intelligence."¹⁴ In the fourth century, Eusebius recorded the debates over accepting Revelation into the canon. In his Church History he wrote a section enumerating which books should be accepted and which should be rejected. At the end of this list he stated "Among the rejected four writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, (Revelation) if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject....And

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), vol. 2, 381.

¹² Eusebius is known for important early church writings and some of the first Christian polemics such as *Demonstrations of the Gospel*, *Preparations for the Gospel*, and *On Discrepancies Between the Gospels*, all of which studied the Biblical text.

¹³ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, trans. Christian Frederick Cruse (New York: Merchant Books, 2011), bk.3, ch.39, 126; One of the "ecclesiastical writers" to which Eusebius is referring was Irenaeus.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 3.39, 13; 7.24.1.

all these may be reckoned among the disputed books.”¹⁵ He wished that people would not become excited over the book of Revelation.

The supporters of another contrary view—amillennialism—interpreted the coming millennium as a symbolic event more consistent with the allegoric nature of the apocalyptic literature of the book of Revelation. In this interpretation the “thousand years” represented God's rule over his creation. Origen (184/185 – 253/254 A.D.), another early church father, opposed the “physical reign” of Christ challenging some of these doctrinal interpretations. In *Commentary on Matthew*, he interpreted the text allegorically, proposing an amillennialist perspective by spiritualizing Christ's second coming. He taught that “Christ's return signifies His disclosure of Himself and His deity to all humanity in such a way that all might partake of His glory to the degree that each individual's actions warrant.”¹⁶ This debate over the millennium and Christ's return continued with predictions of the second coming of Christ occurring two or three times every century. These millennialist views intensified from the Great Awakening through the events surrounding the American Revolution and the War of 1812 as millennialists argued these events were a sign of the imminent coming of Christ.¹⁷ Adams and Jefferson, like Eusebius, were skeptical of such predictions.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.24-25.

¹⁶ Larry V. Crutchfield, “Origen,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, edited by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 289.

¹⁷ Many historians have made this connection. See Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction,” *The Journal of American History* 69 (Sept. 1982): 305-325; Philip Goff, “Revivals and Revolution: Historiographic Turns since Alan Heimert's Religion and the American Mind,” *Church History* 67 (Dec. 1998): 695-721; William G. McLoughlin, “Essay Review: the American Revolution as a Religious Revival: The Millennium in One Country,” *New England Quarterly* 40 (March 1967): 99-110; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Early American millennialist thought was best represented by the Puritans Increase Mather (1639-1723) and Cotton Mather (1663-1728) who suggested a belief in the coming of a literal millennium. Increase Mather wrote “that which presseth me so, as that I cannot gainsay the Chiliastical opinion, is that I take these things for Principles, and no way doubt but that they are demonstrable. 1. That the thousand apocalyptical years are not passed but future. 2. That the coming of Christ to raise the dead and to judge the earth will be within much less than this thousand years. 3. That the conversion of the Jews will not be till this present state of the world is near unto its end. 4. That, after the Jews’ conversion there will be a glorious day for the elect upon earth, and that this day shall be a very long continuance.” Both premillennialism and postmillennialism, ideas expressing expectations for such events, date back to the early colonial period, and included early figures like the Puritan Samuel Sewall.¹⁸ Millennialist predictions of Christ’s return expanded during the era, incorporating more current events, and were fueled by the Great Awakening. Though not considered “premillennialists,” the German Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), the English theologian Daniel Whitby (1688–1726), and the American Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) “fueled millennial ideas with new influence” which carried into the nineteenth century.¹⁹ These writers believed that the waning popularity of the Roman Catholic Church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries paved the way for restoration of the nation of Israel—the true Christian church. Edwards believed that a type of “Millennium” would occur “1260 years after A.D. 606 when

¹⁸ Increase Mather, *The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation Explained and Applied*, quoted in Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 31-32; For the subject of the millennium and the witchcraft trials of the 1690s, see Richard Francis, *Judge Sewall’s Apology: The Salem Witch Trials and the Forming of an American Conscience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

¹⁹ Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 2000).

Rome was recognized as having universal authority.”²⁰ An ardent intellectual like Edwards interpreted the early colonial period as the age where the expectation of the coming millennium were close at hand.²¹

Millennialists of all kinds flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of dramatic events such as the French and Indian War and the Revolution. Some, such as Ebenezer Baldwin, interpreted the American Revolution as “preparing the way for this glorious event” of Christ’s return: the Revolution fulfilled Isaiah’s millennialist prediction or was a precursor to the Millennium.²² As Jon Butler points out, there was no single millennialist vision during the early national period. Dark visions of the new world warned against luxuries, vices and crop failures, while others rationalized “popular secular optimism.” However, apocalyptic thinking declined during the Revolutionary period, according to Butler. He argues that previously “millennialism” always had two things in common: the destruction of the world, and Christ’s return with his thousand-year kingship.²³

Contrarily, other scholars suggest that after the Revolution millennialist thought became more hopeful and suited the American disposition more than apocalypticism, which seemed more threatening.²⁴ The Revolution seemed to signal the beginning of

²⁰ Kevin Stille, “Edwards, Jonathan” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 100.

²¹ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

²² Ebenezer Baldwin and Elhanan Winchester quoted in Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59, 46; for more on this see also James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 248-250.

²³ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 216.

²⁴ There is a difference between apocalypticism and millennialism. Apocalypticism is the belief in an approaching confrontation, cataclysmic event, or transformation of epochal proportion, about which a select few have forewarning so they can make appropriate preparations. Millennialism is a sense of expectation that a significant epochal transformation is imminent, marking the end of a thousand year period, or signaling its beginning, or both.

Christ's thousand-year reign.²⁵ Other popular predictors of the coming millennium included Elhanan Winchester, who linked his universalism of faith to millennialism. Winchester's English lectures in 1789 spelled out God's new covenant with Israel "ensuring the Jewish return to Jerusalem and the final catastrophe of history." Jesus would return, resurrect the Christians and rule over the earth for a thousand years before the "general resurrection and final judgment." Episcopal theologians did not have the same interests after the Revolution, however. Wary of trying to set dates when the Millennium would arrive, they instead believed that the "moral life counted heavily in the divine scheme."²⁶

By the time of the Revolution some interpretations of millennialist thinking predominated in American religion, Joseph Priestley's being one of the most popular. Priestley (1733-1804), the English chemist, natural philosopher, and political radical, was most well known as one of the discoverers of oxygen in 1774, but his breadth of interests also included studying electricity, chemistry, and natural philosophy.²⁷ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Priestley was better known, in some societies, as a dissenting minister who believed in biblical prophecy and who held ardent millenarian beliefs. Believing that he was living in "the last days" before the return of Christ, Priestley studied apocalyptic scriptures. Having a rational and scientific mind, Priestley looked for evidence "that the bible contained absolute truths and tangible proofs of the existence of the deity." The American Revolution was just such a sign for

²⁵ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 217.

²⁶ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 226, 255.

²⁷ The two other candidates for the discovery of oxygen were Carl Scheele and Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier; see Peter J. Bowler and Iwan Rhys Morus, *Making of Modern Science: A Historical Survey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 57-77.

Priestley. His hopefulness strengthened after the French Revolution and the Birmingham riots of 1791.²⁸ Near the end of his life, Priestley turned with intensified interest to the subject of the coming millennium, placing his faith in the impending arrival of Christ and studying scriptural prophecy.²⁹ While Priestley represented a learned and scholarly view of millenarianist thinking, there were also less learned and more popular thinkers for the common provincial Americans. Christopher McPherson, Nimrod Hughes, and Tenskwatawa, lesser known and less educated figures in the early nineteenth century, were more enthusiastic and powerful figures in the millennialist tradition.

McPherson, born around 1763, was a mixed-race slave who lived most of his life near Richmond, Virginia. After McPherson served in the Revolutionary War as a clerk and continued in that profession after the war, his owner set him free at about twenty-nine years old. He converted to Christianity in 1799 and soon started to refer to himself as the "true, real-established and declared representative of Christ Jesus." He offered himself as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," a direct quotation from Revelation 19:16. His *A Short History of the Life of Christopher McPherson* details his hardships: struggles to obtain property, committal to an insane asylum, imprisonment, and involvement in arduous lawsuits involving his unjust treatment. His ability to tolerate such hardships, he claimed, resulted only from his religious fervor and race. McPherson interpreted the lawsuits he endured as a means of restoring the honor and integrity he was due as God's

²⁸ The Birmingham riots—or Priestley Riots—happened from July 14 to 17, 1791 in, England. The main focus for the rioters was religious Dissenters, specifically the theologically and politically controversial Joseph Priestley.

²⁹ Jack Fruchtman, "The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (1983): i, 83; Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773-1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

appointed ambassador, rather than some personal pursuit of justice.³⁰ He believed it was his personal commission and spiritual duty to disclose to world leaders his revelation of future events about the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Specifically, he followed the prophecy of Nimrod Hughes, a Virginian who predicted that a third of mankind would be destroyed (Rev. 9:15, 18) on June 4, 1812.³¹ Much of McPherson's narrative focused on other instances of biblical prophecy, but he felt duty-bound to send letters to rulers around the world urging the necessity of peace, love, and justice. At the conclusion of the narrative, McPherson attached letters previously written to leaders such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the Emperor of Germany, the King of England, the Pope, and the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. The subject of those letters was the impending world doom that would occur unless actions were taken toward peace.³²

Hughes, an argumentative, wandering ex-felon, lived amid the outcasts of the new republic. More than McPherson, he obtained substantial yet fleeting popularity and prophesied visions of death and destruction rather than a grand scale millennial vision of the future. He published only one piece of literature during his life, a best seller entitled *A Solemn Warning to All the Dwellers Upon Earth*, which appeared in the fall of 1811 as America stood on the brink of war with England for a second time.³³ In December 1811, the *Trenton Federalist* displayed an advertisement that hailed Hughes as an

³⁰ Christopher McPherson Smith, *Short History of the Life of Christopher McPherson, Alias Pherson, Son of Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Containing a Collection of Certificates, Letters, &c. Written by Himself*, (Lynchburg: Printed at The Virginian Job Office, 1855).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ The full title of Hughes's piece is: *A Solemn Warning to All the Dwellers Upon Earth, Given Forth in Obedience to the Express Commands of the Lord God, as Communicated by Him in Several Extraordinary Visions: And Miraculous Revelations, Confirmed by Sundry Plain but Wonderful Signs, Unto Nimrod Hughes, of the County Washington, in Virginia. Upon whom the Awful Duty of making this Publication has been Laid and Enforced, by many Admonitions and Sever Chastisements of the Lord, of the space of Ten months and Six Days of unjust and close Confinement in the Prison of Abingdon* (New Jersey, 1811), 2d ed.

“extraordinary prophet, whose writings have excited the curiosity and attention of the public for a considerable time.”³⁴ Other newspapers, such as *Weekly Museum*, were more dismissive of Hughes’ book writing that the “worst thing that people can do is purchase such vile impositions” while still advertising it.³⁵ The *Alexandria Daily Gazette* suggested that Hughes “has found out that the trade of prophesying is easier & more lucrative than hoeing....Any tale which borders on the miraculous and has a hardy wretch to step forward and over to its truth, is sure to be greedily sought after by a vast proportion of the ‘dwellers upon earth.’”³⁶ Hughes’ presence in Alexandria in 1811 received some attention and both newspapers were forced to acknowledge his influence among the provincial peoples of America. Hughes’s central message was rigid: “one year hence, Hughes declared, God would destroy one-third of mankind and subject the rest to “such troubles as never was before.” His message found an audience in the unsettling moment of 1811. As Susan Juster notes, “A series of calamities, recounted in gory detail in the newspapers and magazines of the new republic, seemed to confirm the general of the world spiraling out of control....Earthquakes, hurricanes, eclipses, comets, hailstorms, homicides, suicides, riots, and fires all seemed to occur with ...regularity as relations with Great Britain deteriorated....” To many Americans these continued events only had one explanation: the millennium was close at hand.³⁷

The last figure to mention was Tenskwatawa (1775 –1836), known as The Prophet or Shawnee Prophet, a Native American religious and political figure and the

³⁴ *Trenton Federalist*, December 2, 1811; the same notice appeared in every issue of the newspaper through the month of December.

³⁵ *Weekly Museum*, February 22, 1812.

³⁶ *Alexandria Daily Gazette*, December 12, 1811.

³⁷ The life of Nimrod Hughes is explained in greater detail in Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 196-213.

brother of Tecumseh, leader of the Shawnee tribe. In the early nineteenth century Tenskwatawa condemned the citizens of the new American republic as “children of the devil” and organized Native Americans to fight them. Between 1808 and 1811 Tenskwatawa's preaching became more militant and political, generating sympathy and interest among Native Americans, and young estranged warriors from nearby tribes joined his cause. By 1811, the U.S. Army and settlers in the region were concerned about the tension brewing in Prophetstown, Indiana. Late that year, leaving Tenskwatawa in command at Prophetstown, Tecumseh traveled south to meet other tribal representatives in the hopes of building a larger coalition. He ordered his brother to avoid any altercation with whites during his absence, but on November 7, 1811, William Henry Harrison commanded an American force to surround the village. Though surrounded and outnumbered, Tenskwatawa and his force attacked first. They were easily and swiftly defeated in a two-hour battle that left many dead or wounded. After, the Native Americans stripped the Prophet of his powers. The village at Prophetstown was razed to the ground, effectively ending Tecumseh’s hope of a broad Native alliance.³⁸

When compared to Priestley, McPherson, Hughes, and Tenskwatawa represented a specific, enthusiastic, and unscholarly approach to the millennialist thought. By the early nineteenth century, political thinkers like Madison, Adams, and Jefferson staked the future of the Republic on the rational ability of its citizens to see morality through the lens of freedom. As Mark Noll states, this meant the freedom to read and interpret the Bible for oneself. Here Noll cites Gordon Wood, who points out that these political

³⁸ Much of these events are recounted in several different histories of Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa. For this history from the perspective of spiritual prophecy in the native cultures see Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

thinkers might have viewed “Enlightenment optimism concerning the new order” in different ways, but they never doubted that the “secret of the Revolution’s success lay in discovering the moral laws of human behavior through the ‘science of politics’” and putting them to good use in the new age.³⁹ This is what Wood calls the consuming passion of the Enlightenment.⁴⁰ But rationality and critique with respect to millennial ideas helped to place Adams and Jefferson in their own category.

In a letter on May 29, 1813, Adams wondered whether Jefferson had seen a book containing the “Letters....from Thomas Jefferson Esq. President of the United States to Dr. Priestley...” He continued, “I have much to say on the subject. And you may depend upon it, I will discuss the Subject with as much Candour, as much Friendship, as much Freedom, as Price, Priestley, Lindsey, Cappe or Farmer every displayed in their Controversies...”⁴¹ Having been labeled a “deist” and worse an “atheist,” Jefferson may have been cautious to speak about religion with anyone.⁴² While he was still president, Jefferson shared some of his beliefs about his ideas for a rational Christian Faith with Benjamin Rush.⁴³ But Rush snubbed Jefferson, stating that “unless [the work] advances [the character of Jesus] to divinity and renders his death as well as his life necessary for the restoration of mankind, I shall not accord with its author.”⁴⁴ It is likely that Adams did not know about this particular exchange, although he surely knew, through newspapers and the media, about the public’s portrayal of Jefferson’s religion. Adams

³⁹ Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111.

⁴⁰ Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (1982): 414.

⁴¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 29, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 326.

⁴² As noted earlier, Adams, more than Jefferson, is the generator of religious questions and discussion in their letters. Jefferson answers all queries but rarely poses his own religious inquiries unprovoked.

⁴³ This would later be called “The Philosophy of Jesus” and, in the letters, is referred to as “the syllabus.”

⁴⁴ Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, 29 August 1804, in Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3341-342.

might have been cautious at this point about bringing up religious points with Jefferson. When he did, it was an issue that was more benign than others but relevant to the new republic: the impending millennium.

By the summer of 1812 perhaps both men remembered the foundation upon which their friendship had once been built. During their years of the first and second Continental Congress and as diplomats, their friendship was built upon mutual respect, admiration, intellectual inquiry and debate. Their correspondence between 1812 and 1826 continued that friendship. After sending literature for Jefferson's critique, Adams resumed the old pattern of inquiry through the topic of religion. Adams stated "although you and I are weary of Politicks, You may be surprised to find me making a Transition to such a Subject as Prophecies."⁴⁵ While both men used an enlightened approach to the critique of religion, Adams set the tone and pace of their theological discourse. Adams was careful about his religious queries, first asking questions, then later offering other possibilities, waiting for a response from Jefferson, then finally adding to that response if he could. The issue of the coming millennium was a perfect opportunity for Adams to address the significance of such figures as McPherson, Hughes, and Tenskwatawa and their relation to millennialist thinking so abundant in the early republic.

Apart from millennialist thinking, doctrinal debates between Calvinism and Unitarianism and between Socinianism and Arminianism also raged in the republic in various forms.⁴⁶ These debates saw expression in the coming of the new millennium not only in these religious systems but also from figures such as Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797), Richard Price (1723-1791) and most especially in Joseph Priestley. Adams's

⁴⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 10, 1812, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 297.

⁴⁶ For more detail see Holifield, *Theology in America*, 199-203, 83-84, 86-87, 128-135.

letters of February 10 and May 3, 1812, addressing the millennium, therefore, fit into the political and religious landscape of the time. In these letters he discussed the impending millennium, ultimately wondering if it had biblical significance or if it was just a popular religious issue in America. Adams questioned the validity and likelihood of millennial events as well as the sincerity of modern-day prophets, the book of Revelation, the validity of writers engaged in such religious disputations, and whether the possible signs of the coming millennium were valid.⁴⁷ Adams mentions contemporary writers who, for him, affected provincial Americans' thoughts about the coming millennium: "Dr. Towers [who] wrote two ponderous Vollumes" in the late 1790s, "the Reverend Mr. Faber" and "Mr. Joseph Wharton of Philadelphia" and Priestley.⁴⁸ Prior to the letter, Adams received two volumes written by Nimrod Hewes and Christopher McPherson, both "upon Prophecies and neither, ill written" and admitted they "are not much more irrational than Dr. Towers" whose works predicted the coming millennium.⁴⁹ Adams recognized that all these writings had some impact on society, though for him it was questionable why.

Adams differentiated learned scholarly contributions from mere religious enthusiasm. Great events of religious fervor always emerged in society, Adams speculated, when "ever any great Turmoil happens in the World, [and] has produced fresh prophets."⁵⁰ He speculated this was the case with the Crusades and also true in the rise of religious prophecies of the millennium in 1812.⁵¹ Adams referred, in part, to the escalating tensions between England and America, and how modern "prophets" were

⁴⁷ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 10, 1812, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 297.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Adams is comparing the turmoil of the Crusades with the turmoil of the impending war of 1812 and how both periods brought hopes and predictions of the Millennium; letter of February 10, 1812.

interpreting those events.⁵² The letters demonstrated Adams's and Jefferson's interest in the contemporary events of their age, their inquiry into the validity and truth of those events or writings, and their attempt to correct or exegete the appropriate context or meaning behind them.

Jefferson responded to Adams's millennial comments by turning to Adams's request to "know something of the Richmond and Wabash prophets."⁵³ On the eve of the War of 1812 Jefferson wrote to Adams describing the Shawnee Prophet, Tenskwatawa, as "more rogue than fool, if to be a rogue is not the greatest of all follies."⁵⁴ However, as Gregory Evans Dowd notes, Jefferson did not reveal to Adams in his letter that "in 1807 he had ordered Indiana's territorial governor, William Henry Harrison, to 'gain over the prophet, who no doubt is a scoundrel and only needs his price.'"⁵⁵ To Adams, Jefferson recalled that his administration left the Shawnee alone. In addition, in this letter, Jefferson returned Adams' kind gesture by sending "[Adams] a piece of homespun in return for that I received from you."⁵⁶ Jefferson accepted the intellectual gift Adams offered and in kind repaid him by sending one of his own pieces of literature for Adams to critique. Jefferson was not blatantly dismissive about the subject of religion, but Adams's curiosity was more palpable.

⁵² Adams and Jefferson continued this discussion throughout the course of their correspondence with other letters emerging 1814, 1816 and 1823. The main concentration, however, of this style of writing occurs early on their discourse.

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 20, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 298.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, Aug. 12, 1807, in *Daniel Parker Papers, (Collection 466)* Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Gregory Evans Dowd gives more details of this story in *A Spirited Resistance*, 117-118.

⁵⁶ This piece of literature which Jefferson sent Adams was *The Proceedings of the Government of the United States, in maintaining the Public Right to the Beach of the Mississippi, Adjacent to New-Orleans, against the Intrusion of Edward Livingston* printed in New York in 1812; Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 20, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 298.

Adams and Jefferson discovered their critiques of prophecy and religions were similar as they arrived at comparable conclusions. In his next letter, Jefferson answered his friend's question about the "divine predictions" of the Wabash prophet Tenskwatawa. Jefferson rejected the supposed divine origin suggesting that "every man that is mad, and maketh himself a prophet, though shouldest put him in prison and in the stocks."⁵⁷ Here Jefferson recalled how prophets in the Bible were supposed to be tested.⁵⁸ Impressed by the response, Adams noted that he had forgotten about this passage in the Bible and, while he acknowledged Jefferson's "superiority in most branches of Science and Literature," he was surprised to "confess [his superiority] in Biblical Knowledge" as well.⁵⁹ Both men accurately recalled the scripture passage in Jeremiah which was used to test "prophets." Not only was this a demonstration of recalling an obscure passage in the Old Testament, but it was also a demonstration that both men were contextualizing the passage correctly. That the prophets of the Old Testament should be tested was well known throughout Judeo-Christian history; how they were to be tested and why was a less well known. Adams agreed with Jefferson, further supporting Jefferson's claim by expressing his wish that "the ancient practice [would continue] down to more modern times."⁶⁰ Adams thanked Jefferson offering no opposition to his suggestions about these prophets, saying "Your Letter, written with all the Accuracy perspicuity and Elegance ... has given me great Satisfaction..."⁶¹ In the midst of disagreement on political discourse which occurred in 1812 and 1813, Adams and Jefferson respected each other

⁵⁷ Here Jefferson is quoting from Jeremiah 29: 26.

⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 20, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 298; reference to Jeremiah 29:26.

⁵⁹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 3, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 302.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 308.

on even more controversial topics.⁶² All the while they never disagreed on the subject of religion.

Many Americans believed God would bring his millennial plans to fruition in their country and hoped to be cooperative participants in hastening the second coming of Christ.⁶³ Adams questioned the sincerity of modern day “prophets” who suggested that “the French Revolution [was] the commencement of the coming of the Millennium,” and that the execution of the King of France was the first “of the Ten Horns of the great Beast” of the book of Revelation.⁶⁴ He mentioned the “Reverend Mr. Faber who has lately written a very elegant and learned Volume to prove that Napoleon is Antichrist” and that “our worthy Friend Mr. Joseph Wharton...has ...settled his opinion, that the City of London is or is to be the Head Quarters of Antichrist...”⁶⁵ Adams was not simply referencing theological points for critique. These comments all represented different millennial beliefs interpreted from a literal reading of Revelation which culminated with the belief in the coming of Christ. Adams was demonstrating to Jefferson his awareness of such literalist interpretations applied to the early nineteenth century and he was increasingly disturbed by such predictions.⁶⁶

⁶² While it is not within the scope of this project, it is important to note that Adams and Jefferson in their first few years of resuming their correspondence, raised political, economic, and presidential issues from their past about which they did not agree but instead politely argued their positions. They clearly differed on their conception of aristocracy and the need for a navy. They justified to each other their political decisions when they were President. They did not justify or argue with each other over the issue of religion. Never once did they point out each other’s flaws when it came to theological discourse.

⁶³ For greater detail on this subject see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285-327.

⁶⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 10, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 297.

⁶⁵ Reverend Faber wrote his narrative in 1811 and an observation on this piece came out entitled *Obsevation on Mr. Faber’s Third Volume of a Dissertation of the Prophecies Relative to the Period of 1260 years*, printed for J. Hatchard, (Picadilly, London: 1819); similarly, Joseph Wharton wrote a commentary on *The Works of Alexander Pope Esq.*, printed for B. Law, (Picadilly, London: 1797).

⁶⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 10, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 297.

Adams's point was unmistakable in what he wrote next: "the Continual Refutation of all their⁶⁷ prognostications by Time and Experience has no Effect in extinguishing or damping their Ardor."⁶⁸ Adams was explaining how century after century the approach of the new millennium had been "prophesied," but it had yet to emerge. Adams acknowledged the continued "prophecy" of the impending millennium but was skeptical of the entire process. The millennium still had not arrived, but this did not sway popular religious enthusiasts—much to Adams's chagrin—from predicting the coming of the second Millennium.⁶⁹ Far from the enthusiastic and popular religious beliefs of the majority of churchgoers in America at the time, Adams and Jefferson were doubtful that such religious interpretations were correct. Instead, these statesmen saw them as merely the result of the enthusiast positions that occurred "whenever any great Turmoil happened in the World" which, Adams recognized, always produced "fresh Prophets."⁷⁰

Adams concluded the letter by explaining why he raised the topic of "prophecies." For Adams, such thinking and prophecies were "unphilosophical and inconsistent with the political Safety of States and Nations...."⁷¹ Unsubstantiated and emotional predictions without any benefit of history or proper augmentation, he suggested, were unsafe and led to false beliefs about religious doctrine. The provincial population's belief in the impending millennium would disrupt the delicate fabric of the republic he and Jefferson had fought so hard to build and preserve. Adams offered a

⁶⁷ Supposed modern day prophets who made the predictions in the prior paragraph.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ In addition to McPherson, Hughes, and Tenskwatawa, Noll and Holifield both discuss Evangelical participation in predicting the millennium.

⁷⁰ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 10, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 297.

⁷¹ Ibid.

solution for such enthusiastic, and dangerous, propositions: “the most sincere and sober Christians in the World ought upon their own Principles to hold [these prophecies] impious,” for the scriptures plainly tell that “[the ancients] Prophecies were not intended to make Us Prophets.”⁷² Adams worried about how the republic would be preserved with such emotional and unsubstantiated arguments about the millennium circulating.

Although Jefferson remarked that McPherson was “too honest to be molested by anyone” and really had no significance, he expressed a similar disdain for enthusiastic religion and false prophets of his day who made unsubstantiated predictions.

Returning to the topic of the Millennium in his next letter, Adams mentioned McPherson again. A friend loaned Adams Hughes’s book and Adams loaned the copy to another friend. Some “visitors” to this second friend read the copy and developed a “great deal of terror and a serious Apprehension” that one third of the “human race will be destroyed” early the next month.⁷³ Adams commented on the biblical idea which he presented on February 10, 1812, and which Jefferson addressed. Adams did not subscribe to such “prophecies” and “could not believe” the fact that his friends who were “not remarkably superstitious” succumbed to such thoughts. When Adams wrote that “the transition from one crazy set of crazy people to another is not unnatural” he suggested that uneducated and “crazy” people had made these predictions before.⁷⁴ Rather than believing in the second coming of Christ, Adams believed in something more scripturally rational.

⁷² Ibid., 297-298.

⁷³ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 3, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 302.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Early in the correspondence Adams asked Jefferson, "...Where is the Amelioration of Society? Where the Augmentations of human Comforts? Where the diminutions of human Pains and miseries?...When? Where? And how? Is the present Chaos to be arranged into Order."⁷⁵ The present "chaos" to which Adams referred was the continuing war with England—just starting its second year by May of 1813. The future perfection of society, which the millennialists believed would come in the form of Christ, meant something different for Adams and Jefferson.⁷⁶ Late in the correspondence Adams answered his own question about "when the arrival of perfection in society would come." Jefferson provided the context in the letter directly prior saying, "...the flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776. have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism."⁷⁷

While Americans waited and hoped for physical salvation and freedom in the form of Christ, Adams responded with a spiritual point: "Hope springs eternal."⁷⁸ As the Jews waited for a "Messiah more powerful and glorious than Moses, David, or Solomon, who is to make them as powerful as he pleases"; as "Musslemen expect another Prophet more powerful than Mahomet"; while Hundreds of millions of Christians expect and hope for a millennium in which Jesus is to reign for a thousand years"; while the "Hindoos expect" a final incarnation of Vishnu while even the Greeks hope for a "deliverer...Themistoclese [or] Demostheneses," Adams found a different hope for

⁷⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 15, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 358.

⁷⁶ For further background on the expectations and different cultural views of the coming millennium during the early republic, see Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*; Holifield, *Theology in America*; Noll, *America's God*; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*.

⁷⁷ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Sept. 12, 1821, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 575.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

society. Adams asked how these cultures came to such spiritual hope of salvation. For Adams, his and Jefferson's beliefs were more sound and rational, for "You and I hope for splendid improvements in human society": "...our faith may be supported by more rational arguments than any of the former."⁷⁹ Adams was not making a claim here about a future religious event like the millennium. In fact he was denying the coming millennium in favor of a more rational and reasoned event: the expectation of the effects of the American Revolution on the early American republic. Through rational speculation Adams and Jefferson believed that Americans ought to wait and hope for a better society based on republican virtue instead of waiting for the second coming of Christ.

According to Adams and Jefferson, the millennialist position so entrenched in Christian belief in the new republic resulted from the proliferation of writings and interpretations of "false prophets" like McPherson and Hughes, who were misinterpreting the scriptures. The coming millennium had been prophesied hundreds of times over the centuries and the "Continual Refutation" of this "Prognostication" was manifest in the fact that Jesus had not yet returned.

From the questioning of contemporary writers such as Priestley, Lindsay, or Adair, and religious prophecy and the coming millennium, Adams and Jefferson focused on biblical concepts known for being controversial. Their letters indicated their mutual respect for one another and for their intellectual abilities. That mutual respect turned to a deeper sense of critique as they both were concerned with what might happen to the republic if the foundation upon which it was built—religion—was besmirched by

⁷⁹ Ibid.

enthusiastic and popular interpreters. By mid-1813 Adams and Jefferson turned to critiquing the biblical doctrine itself. While the topic of the impending millennium seemed to be a driving theological point, it was only the introduction of many topics that both Adams and Jefferson felt would affect people's religious foundations and therefore the cohesion of republican virtue. At stake were larger and more pressing religious issues for Adams and Jefferson, such as the concept of the Trinity.

Chapter 2: The Trinity

The religious belief in the coming millennium was a belief of immediate concern for provincial Americans and preachers alike in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Many people believed their behavior and actions would directly affect the coming of Christ. In part, then, the reform movements of the early nineteenth century sprung from the motivation of Americans to create the perfect republican society which, Americans hoped, might usher in the millennium.¹ While Adams's and Jefferson's letters responded to this societal conversation, they were also concerned with other, less immediate issues. The concept of the Trinity was more a controversial scriptural point which affected how people viewed the character of God or Jesus. Since the time of the early church, debate arose regarding the justification of the doctrine of the Trinity. By the eighteenth century this debate became a contentious topic in the post-revolutionary formation of interpretations of the Bible. By 1813 Adams and Jefferson began their own critique of the Trinity. While their conversations on religion continued over the course of their letters with a focus on other biblical concepts like the afterlife, prayer, and miracles, they devoted considerable time and effort citing historical and scriptural evidence to support their arguments about the Trinity.² This chapter will enumerate the instances when

¹ Several historians of the early republic have alluded to this point. For further background on the expectations and different cultural views of the coming millennium during the early republic see Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press., 1990); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

² It should be noted here that the topics Adams and Jefferson discussed have biblical derivation. It is not always the case that they directly lift quotes and passages from scripture to make their arguments. Chapter 2 will explicate the religious concepts that Adams and Jefferson critiqued, while chapter 3 will attempt to clarify how these concepts should have been interpreted based on a rational reading of scripture. I would note the difference between these two

Adams and Jefferson suggested that the Trinity of the Christian faith arose from false understandings of doctrine.

Of all the Christian controversies one of the earliest and most heated concerned the concept of the Trinity. In Christian theology the “Trinity” is defined as one God in three persons. God is seen as three divine entities or *υποστασις* (*hypostasis*)³: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. The three entities are separate and yet are also one “substance, essence or nature.”⁴ According to this doctrine, there is only one God in three persons yet each person is God, whole and entire. These three “persons” are distinct from one another in their relations of origin: as the Fourth Lateran Council declared, “it is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.”⁵ While distinct in their relations with one another, they are one in all else while being co-equal, co-eternal and consubstantial. Yet none of the above definitions can be explicitly found in the New Testament. Historically, the debate emerged early in the second century and focused on the writings of the Apostles: in the scripture, did the Apostles articulate the Trinitarian Creed, or were the scriptures corrupted later on and replaced with this new Trinitarian Creed? Scholars agree that this creed was created in reaction to disagreements over the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The earliest historical evidence for the debate over the Trinity can be traced back to the early Church fathers from the third century and to the rise of neo-platonism.

points is subtle: often times when Adams and Jefferson were discussing the corruptions and issues with religious doctrine they were, in the same sentence, correcting the doctrine as well.

³ This concept, *hypostatis*, is defined in Greek as assurance, confidence, person, substance. In this context it is used as “person”; W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary* (Nashville & London: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 43.

⁴ As defined by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994), 2nd ed., 253.

⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

Neoplatonism, a school of mystical philosophy which developed in the third century, was based on the teachings of Plato (428/427 – 348/347 B.C.E) and other Platonists of whom the earliest proponent was Plotinus (ca. 204/5–270 C.E.).⁶ Neoplatonism centered on the spiritual and cosmological features of Platonic thought. Plotinus taught that there is a supreme, totally transcendent "One," having no division or multiplicity, identified as "One" and the same as the "Good." This philosophy greatly influenced the development of early Christian theology. In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell explained how Christian theologians "combined these points of view...[and] Plotinus...is historically important as an influence in moulding [early] Christianity..."⁷ The writers of the first three centuries of Christianity—called the Ante-Nicene Fathers—had no knowledge of Trinitarian theology because this concept was not defined until the fourth century. Nevertheless they affirmed Christ's deity and referenced the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁸ The first recorded defense of the doctrine of the Trinity was in the early third century by the early church father Tertullian, who explicitly defined the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Other controversies during this century complicated the debate over the Trinity.⁹

⁶ "Platonism" is the philosophy that asserts the existence of abstract objects, which "exist" in a "third realm distinct both from the sensible external world and from the internal world of consciousness; Gideon Rosen, "Abstract Objects", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, published Spring 2012 Edition, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/abstract-objects/>.

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 284-285.

⁸ This refers to the period following the Apostolic Age of the middle of the first century to the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. This portion of Christian history had a significant impact on the unity of doctrine across all Christendom and the spreading of Christianity to a greater area of the world.

⁹ Of these Trinitarian controversies, the most significant developments were expressed late in the fourth century by the Church Fathers in reaction to Adoptionism, Sabellianism, and Arianism. Most importantly, "Adoptionism" was the belief that Jesus was an ordinary man, born of Joseph and Mary, who became the Christ and Son of God at his baptism. In 269 A.D., the Synods of Antioch condemned Paul of Samosata for his Adoptionist theology, and also condemned the term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος, "of the same being") in the sense he used it; Charles G. Herberman, ed. "Paul of Samosata," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913), 406.

Two figures in the third century contributed to this ongoing debate: Arius (250 or 256–336 A.D.) and Athanasius (ca. 296-298 – d. 2 May 373). The debate, which became prominent in the early fourth century, came down to the difference in one letter in Greek. Either the Father came before the Son and the Son was a distinct being from the Holy Spirit *homoi ouses* (of similar substance) or the Father and Son were one and the same *homo ouses* (of one substance). In 325, the Council of Nicaea adopted the Nicene Creed which described Christ as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." The creed used the term *homoousios* to define the relationship between the Father and the Son. From then on, it was seen as the hallmark of orthodoxy, and was further developed into the formula of "three persons, one being." Arius was excommunicated from the church over one Greek letter.

Athanasius, a participant on the Council, rationalized that the bishops were forced to use this terminology not found in Scripture, because the biblical phrases they would have preferred were previously used by the Arians and were interpreted in what the bishops considered "a heretical sense."¹⁰ It is important to note that here Arius was defending the "controversial" belief and he lost. But other definitions would complicate matters.

Eusebeius relied upon Origen in this controversy over the Trinity. He began with the fundamental notion of the absolute sovereignty of God. But Eusebius emphasized the difference between the entities of the Trinity and preserved the subordination of the Son (Logos, or Word) to God. The Son (Jesus) was an hypostasis of God the Father whose generation took place before time. Jesus acted as the "organ" or "instrument" of God, the creator of life, the principle of every revelation of God, who in his absoluteness and

¹⁰Athanasius, *Defence of the Nicene Definition* or (*De Decretis*), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 19.

transcendence was enthroned above and isolated from the entire world. Likewise, Eusebius described the relation of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity as similar to that of the Son to the Father. No point of this doctrine was original with Eusebius; it was traced back to his teacher Origen. After nearly being excommunicated for his heresy by Alexander of Alexandria, Eusebius submitted and agreed to the Nicene Creed in 325. Through Christian history and up until the modern era, this history largely went unnoticed except by the scholars. The word “Trinity” did not occur anywhere in the original Greek of the New Testament. It was therefore a concept which must be justified based on the interpretation of dogma and later emerging doctrine. The debate in eighteenth and nineteenth century America with respect to the Trinity began around the same time as the Revolution.

Universalist—non-Trinitarian—preachers helped to shift the theological landscape of Christianity at the end of the eighteenth century about the context and importance of the Trinity. In England it was illegal to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, and this remained the case until the passage of the 1813 Doctrine of the Trinity Act.¹¹ In America, the debate was varied. Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797), son of a farmer and shoemaker in Massachusetts, only had minimal schooling but became an itinerant Baptist preacher in 1769. After reading *Everlasting Gospel* he was persuaded by the Universalist position and moved to Philadelphia in 1780. He took a six-year trip to England from September 1787 to July 1794, became familiar with Unitarians, and met Richard Price

¹¹ The Doctrine of the Trinity Act of 1813 (also called the Trinitarian Act of 1812) was an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom which amended the Blasphemy Act of 1697 in respect of its Trinitarian provisions. Also known as the *Unitarian Relief Act (Trinity Act)* or *The Unitarian Toleration Bill*, it granted toleration for Unitarian worship, as previously the Act of Toleration 1689 had only granted toleration to those Protestant dissenters who accepted the Trinity. The background for this can be found in Holifield, *Theology in America*, 224-227.

(1723 –1791), Thomas Belsham (1750 – 1829), and Joseph Priestley.¹² He also published *The Universal Restoration: Exhibited in Four Dialogues* in 1788. Winchester returned to New England in 1794 for a preaching tour and became moderator of the Massachusetts Universalist Convention, then returned to Philadelphia in 1796. Belsham was an English Unitarian minister whose beliefs reflected the transition of the Unitarian movement from the early Bible-fundamentalist views of earlier English Unitarians to the more Bible-critical positions of Priestley's generation. Similarly Price was a Welsh preacher in the tradition of English Dissenters, and a political pamphleteer, active in the American Revolution. Debate emerged between Calvinist ministers and Unitarian theologians around 1800 when Calvinist ministers started to exclude liberals from pulpit exchanges and from there the debate raged into the 1820s. The debate continued in the new republic between figures like Henry Ware Sr. (1764-1845), the old Calvinist Jedediah Morse (1761-1821), and later Moses Stuart (1780-1852), and Andrews Norton (1786-1853).¹³ Many acknowledged their debt to Price, such as the Unitarian theologians William Ellery Channing and Lindsey, and the dissenting clergyman, Joseph Priestley. Theophilus Lindsey resigned his living and moved to London to create an avowedly Unitarian congregation, and Price played a key role in finding and securing the premises for what became Essex Street Chapel. Both Price and Priestley were what would now vaguely be called "Unitarians." Nonetheless, various theologians and clergymen began to voice non-Trinitarian views by the last decade of the eighteenth century. It was Priestley, however, who deeply affected Adams and Jefferson.

¹² These three were all Unitarians of some sort and represented important thinkers who had diverged from the normal doctrine of Christian society.

¹³ See Holifield, *Theology in America*, ch. 7.

A notable Enlightenment figure, Priestley published almost two hundred works on subjects like education, political philosophy, metaphysics, natural philosophy, theology, politics, history and linguistics. Priestley considered his true calling to be a theologian and so spent most of his life working as a minister and teacher. He combined Unitarian thinking with determinist and materialist philosophy to create a coherent, rationalistic religious world-view which was the subject of bitter controversy among his generation as he earned a reputation for being a “rational dissenter.” From his scientific background and process of scientific investigation, Priestley prioritized the experimental and the practical above the purely theoretical. His theology had a similar framework. His understanding of the world was based on an assumption that truths were demonstrable and revealed through observation and experience. He used this methodology to explain scripture, placing it alongside the natural world in order to understand a God who orchestrated and determined all events for the ultimate good of humanity. This rational biblical exploration led him to argue for the unity of God and to deny the Trinity. For Priestley, Jesus was wholly human and did not die as an atonement for inherently sinful humanity, but lived to exemplify the perfect moral life that all people could potentially attain. Priestley argued that the truths of scripture were available to all through the careful application of reason.¹⁴

Applying his theological methods to scripture, Priestley provoked a religious faith that he regarded as highly reasonable and as true as possible to the purest form of Christianity since the early church. Priestley believed that the Christianity of the modern

¹⁴ All of what follows is from “Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A peer-Reviewed Academic Resource,” last modified August 11, 2008, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/priestly/>; See also Marilyn Brooks, “Priestley’s Plan for a Continually Improving Translation of the Bible,” *Enlightenment and Dissent* 15 (1996): 89-106.

era was not the Christianity which Jesus taught. By the late 1760s he already denied the Trinity, became an Arian and formally adopted the Unitarian creed he held for most of his adult life. Priestley argued that the notion of the Trinity was an irrational principle of an unquestioning faith, which asked a person to replace individual reason with trust in church authorities, whose power was perpetuated by ideas shrouded in superstition and mystery. Priestley's historical work led him to argue that the early Christians and Church Fathers did not believe in the Trinity either and that this was a corrupt belief that had crept into scripture over the centuries. The concept of the Trinity developed over time as gentile beliefs permeated the unlearned culture. In the New Testament, while the role of Jesus was essential, God was entirely exclusive of Jesus; there was no coexistence or "oneness." Priestley argued that when scripture appears to say that "the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are equally divine," the language should be read figuratively not literally. Thus Jesus was wholly human and an ordinary man with the powers he displayed simply granted to him by God. Christ was not God, was not divine, and should not be worshipped, despite being a person worthy of utmost respect and love.¹⁵ Priestley's ideas proved to be too radical for late eighteenth century England and so he was driven out of England due to his republican politics and his religion.

Priestley represented the more "radical English Unitarian" thinking in America after he arrived in Pennsylvania in 1794. After his arrival in Pennsylvania in 1794, he preached at Elhanan Winchester's Universalist meeting house in Philadelphia, then helped to create a smaller group in 1796, "the Unitarian Society." His theology attracted the attention of some English immigrants but more importantly of some American

¹⁵ Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773-1804*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

intellectuals, most notably Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.¹⁶ Priestley agreed with New Englanders in “affirming the unity of God and rejecting the doctrines of Calvinism, including original sin” while still affirming the “physical resurrection of the body at the return of Jesus.”¹⁷ But unlike the other New England teachers he suggested Jesus was a mere human being. In his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity (1782)* and his *History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus (1789)* he denied that Jesus was sinless and that he possessed infallible knowledge. However controversial Priestley’s ideas may have been to the American public, it was his religious thinking to which Adams and Jefferson turned in the summer of 1813.

Adams first referred to the legitimacy of the doctrine of the Trinity on July 13, 1813. Using rational propositions to critique the Bible, Adams said “I have never read Reasoning more absurd, Sophistry more gross, in proof of the Athanasian Creed . . .” as when Helvetius and Rousseau attempted to prove the equality of man.¹⁸ Later in the letter, describing a meeting of the “French Assemblies,” Adams decided Turgot’s doctrine of “Government in one Centre and that Center the Nation,” as being as “contradictory as the Athanasian Creed.”¹⁹ Adams’s point in this example was clear; he was suggesting how an enlightened and reasoned reading of scripture would not yield a conclusion of the belief in the Trinity. A reasoned reading and critique of the scriptures would suggest the unity of God. He concluded that the concept of the “trinity” was a

¹⁶ The history of this debate and its early leanings in the new Republic can be found in Holifield, *Theology in America*, 197-217.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁸ The Athanasian Creed is a Christian statement of belief focused on Trinitarian doctrine. It is the first creed—non-Biblical statement—that developed into a church law, in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated in the form of God, the Son and the Holy Spirit all as equal; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 13, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 356.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

contradiction in thought and ought to be rejected. He was not saying that the Bible itself was corrupt. He was only suggesting that the dogmas and interpretations of the scripture—about the Trinity for example—were incorrect. The Athanasian Creed, Adams and Jefferson saw, was not something found in the Bible but instead was created centuries later. For Adams the French government served as a parallel example: it was a contradiction to have a central, unifying, government which also comprised the entirety of a nation but, in the same breath, called itself “Republican.” For Adams, a government could not be a powerful center and represent the entire nation at the same time.

Jefferson explained to Adams a recollection about Priestley. Priestley once suggested that “if all England would candidly examine themselves, and confess, they would find that Unitarianism was really the religion of all.”²⁰ Jefferson shared with Adams his beliefs about the Trinity, and agreed with Adams’s prior critique of the Trinity. He further suggested it was “too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticism.”²¹ Jefferson was aware of Platonism and the debates that emerged around the development of the concept of the Trinity. He also saw this scripture as a fabrication of doctrine or a poor interpretation of what the scripture actually said. Jefferson further suggested that it did not make sense to “believe that three are one, and one is three; and yet the one is not three, and the three are not one.”²² Jefferson concurred with Adams that, although many had justified the idea of the “Triune God” and its importance in Christian literature, it was not just contradictory, but also a “dogma” that emerged long after the writings of the New Testament. Christians over the

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 22, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 368-370.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 22, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 368-369.

course of centuries had justified the Trinity trying to cite specific scripture. Jefferson recognized that this “doctrine” served to further “divide mankind by a single letter into ómoousians and ómuovsians.”²³ Jefferson was referring to the famous debate between Arius and Athanasius, the “one letter” debate of the Greek word. Both he and Adams rejected the Trinity based on their understanding of ancient history.

They recognized that the debate over the Trinity was not a scriptural debate but a historical one. Yet mainstream Christians of the early republic did not use history to understand Christianity the way these two men did.²⁴ Too much argument and debate had occurred over two Greek letters, Jefferson suggested, making this point clear to those just reading the scripture and nothing else. He rejected the precepts of the Catholic Church, suggesting that the power of the priests who inhabited and controlled the Christian Church in the early years also corrupted its message. Jefferson proposed that if beliefs about the Trinity and other corruptions were rectified, all people would “moralise for [themselves]...and say nothing about what no man can understand...for ...belief [is] the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.”²⁵ For Jefferson it was paramount to arrive at certain biblical conclusions using reason. He was not alone in rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity, as Adams sympathized with him in his next letter. Even if he and Jefferson had been with Moses for the forty years in the desert, Adams suggested, and witnessed the “Shekinah, and there [were] told that one was three and three, one... We

²³ Jefferson explained the contradictory nature of the Trinity when he said “[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; and yet the one is not three, and the three are not one.” The issue Jefferson brought up in the later part of the sentence was one of theological and historical significance. The belief about Jesus and his character as it related to God emerged in the third century AD with a particular reference to a Greek interpretation of one word and one letter. Roughly translated, the word meant either “exactly alike in nature” or “similar in nature.” For further explication of this debate, see such historians as David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

²⁴ See Holifield, *Theology in America* and Noll, *America’s God*.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 22, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 368.

could not have believed it.”²⁶ Both men—followers of the rational Age of Enlightenment—agreed with Plato’s principle of non-contradiction: something can’t be and not be at the same time.²⁷ Jefferson and Adams alluded to a similar point: a scholar of the enlightenment would see from reason not only that the concept of the Trinity was a contradiction, but also that it clearly emerged in history as a result of the corruption of the priesthood and dogma.

Adams agreed with Jefferson’s assessment. In showing his respect for the process of critique, Adams discussed the merits of reason and “human Understanding” which, as he defined them, were a “revelation from its Maker which can never be disputed or doubted.”²⁸ Adams was adamant about the use of reason and believed it more important and powerful than other substances or quality which God granted humans. “No prophecies, no Miracles are necessary to prove [human understanding],” he suggested, and further that none were needed to demonstrate that “two and one make three; and that one is not three; nor can three be one.”²⁹ Using this enlightened process, Adams also questioned the idea and fulfillment of prophecy and the idea and design of miracles. “There can be no Scepticism...or Incredulity or Infidelity here,” Adams wrote.³⁰ Reason, for Adams, was a central characteristic for humans. There was no need to demonstrate this “divine communication” or gift of reason by “prophecies...or miracles.”³¹ Instead Adams suggested a belief in the “revelation of nature i.e. nature’s God that two and two

²⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Sept. 14, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 373.

²⁷ Plato’s Principle of non-contradiction basically states a contradiction is impossible.

²⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Sept. 14, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 373.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

are equal to four.”³² Even more so for Adams, reason gave people the ability to see the rationality in nature. The concept of reason, for Adams, gave humans the ability to never be as certain of “any Prophecy...or of any miracle” as humans were of “the revelation of nature i.e. natures God that two and two are equal to four.”³³ In his next letter Adams made a note about the character of God, saying that “an eternal Solitude of a Self existent Being infinitely wise, powerful and good, is to me, altogether incomprehensible and incredible.”³⁴ Adams did not reject a belief in God; he was rejecting the idea that a human being trying to understand God was an “incomprehensible” task. He then said he could sooner “believe in the Athanasian Creed.”³⁵ Adams was trying to demonstrate that the Athanasian Creed, with its historical context and false dogmatic developments over centuries, was easier to understand and discover—through reason—than trying to understand the concept of God. Adams was using an enlightened rational critique of religion to arrive at a well reasoned belief in the tenets and teachings of the Christian religion. For him and Jefferson this meant an instructive and educated faith, not one based on contradictions and corruptions.

The debate over the Trinity was a theologically contentious matter that emerged before Priestley’s arrival and continued through the time of Adams’s and Jefferson’s letters.³⁶ By 1815, Adams went as far as to relate the experience of American Revolution to the experience of the Council of Nicea. “The Congress of 1774, resembled in some respects, the Counsell of Nice in Ecclaesiastical History” in its rational and orderly

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Sept. 15, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 375.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 199-203.

process. The Congress of 1774 could be found in the “Record of thirteen Legislatures, the pamphlets, Newspapers” which could be consulted to ascertain the “Steps by which the public Opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the Authority of Parliament over the colonies.”³⁷ Just as the democratic process of the Continental Congress of 1774 could be determined through records, so could the Council of Nicea also be determined through records and history. Just as the Convention of 1774 assembled its delegates by vote to represent the colonies, so did the representatives of the Council of Nicea. “Priests from the East and the West and the North and the South” assembled not through divine grace but by proxy. The continental delegates argued, discussed and finally voted upon certain measures. Similarly, the Priests of the Council of Nicea, “compared notes, engaged in discussions, and debates and formed results by one Vote and by two Votes....”³⁸ Just as the continental convention was mixed in its opinions and ideas but appeared unanimous in their outcome to the public, the results of the Council of Nicea “went out to the World as unanimous.”³⁹ Though to the Christian world the Council of Nicea was viewed as an inspired event, Adams suggested that like the American Revolution, the Council was democratic and secular, devoid of Godly inspiration. The fraudulent results of believing this council to be an act of God, Adams warned, were evident in the dogma passed down to generations resulting in the erroneous concept that the Trinity was something biblical and inspired. Just as the American Revolution was a neither inspired nor divine event, neither was the Council of Nicea and its resulting concept of the Trinity.

³⁷ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Aug. 24, 1815, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 455.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Jefferson contributed a sophisticated argument against the Trinity in one of his most comprehensive letters on religion on April 11, 1823. Jefferson discussed the character and nature of God citing different ancient historians such as Origen and Tertullian.⁴⁰ He then cited the first three verses of John, in Greek.⁴¹ This translation, very close to William Tyndale's from the sixteenth century, outlined the words in Greek.⁴² What was important to note, Jefferson wrote, were the words. Jefferson stated that this text was "so plainly declaring the doctrine of Jesus that the world was created by the supreme, intelligent being..." that it demonstrated that the world was created by God or an intelligent singular God.⁴³ But Jefferson pointed out how the text had been corrupted in its translation, "perverted by modern Christians to build up a second person of their tritheism by mistranslation of the word λογος (logos)."⁴⁴ The "logos," from the Greek, could be translated into many different words: cause, communication, doctrine, mouth, reason, speech, or word.⁴⁵ Jefferson suggested that the "legitimate translations [of logos] indeed was 'a word.'"⁴⁶ He showed how the other translation—that of "reason"—was equally as legitimate. Further, for Jefferson, this other translation of "reason" provided a better explanation of God as a singular being and not a "triune" being. Jefferson said an understanding of God's character using reason, "explain[ed] rationally the eternal preexistence of God and his creation of the world."⁴⁷ He continued

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 593.

⁴¹ The Greek here reads "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."

⁴² William Tyndale's Bible is credited with being the first English translation to work directly from Hebrew and Greek texts in the 1530s.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 593.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Vine, Unger, & White, Jr, *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary*, 732.

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 594.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

explaining how the corruption of the developing church in the fourth century used this word and translation to determine the God of the Trinity. Jefferson said that these Christians, “knowing how incomprehensible it was that ‘a word,’ the mere action or articulation of the voice and organs of speech could create a world, . . . undertake to make of this articulation a second preexisting being, and ascribe to him, and not to God, the creation of the universe.”⁴⁸ Jefferson explained that the early Christians thought that the reason of God, or the mere “will” and “word” of God, was insufficient to create material matter or the physical universe. Therefore those Christians felt it necessary to create a “second preexisting being” who created the universe.⁴⁹ That being, Jefferson explained, became Jesus in the Trinity. Scripturally this led to the belief that somehow Jesus pre-existed the physical world and existed with God at the time of God’s creation of the universe. From this, a reading of John 1:1-5 would suggest that Jesus was ‘the word.’ For Jefferson, ‘logos’ in John 1 should have been read as ‘reason’ and not ‘word.’ Using rationality, Jefferson arrived at the conclusion that God created the universe using reason rather than through the more mystical, pre-existing Jesus.

Adams and Jefferson did not question the ideas and beliefs of the teachings of Jesus, but the process by which the scriptures had been interpreted and transmitted in the past. Their letters represented a well thought out and argued dialogue critiquing the ideas imposed upon scriptures and doctrine. Their specific, intellectually supported beliefs did not fit in any theological category of their era, as Frazer notes. Their conception of religion was purely rational and devoid of mysticism and false doctrine. Adams and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Here Jefferson was referring to the translation of John 1:1 which suggests that Jesus was the ‘word’ and that he created the universe in what the dogmatist Christians saw in the Trinity.

Jefferson felt comfortable enough with each other to critique and question certain biblical ideas and recognized doctrine though they were reticent about sharing this with anyone else. Looking at what Adams and Jefferson have questioned thus far, it is reasonable to suggest that their view of the Bible was equally unorthodox. While the Bible had a history of a rigid, “literalistic” interpretation going back to the time of Martin Luther, Adams and Jefferson saw such an interpretation as an impediment to understanding the true religion of God. They saw the Bible as a set of documents that should be rationally and contextually understood and critiqued just as any other books should. Doing this would yield a proper understanding of the teachings of Jesus and of other scriptural points.

Chapter 3: A Rational Reading and Interpretation of the Bible

In the correspondence it is difficult to differentiate between Adams's and Jefferson's critique of corrupt biblical principles and their reformulation of a proper rational faith. At times they are one in the same. When Adams wrote, "I have never read Reasoning more absurd, Sophistry more gross" with respect to the reasoning that has been held for the Athanasian Creed he was making a philosophical and historical claim about the Trinity.¹ Not only was he making a claim about the scripture, but he was also making a claim about the rationality or reasonableness of the concept of the Trinity. The examples thus far presented—prophecy, millennialism, and the Trinity—all represented issues in contemporary religion which deeply affected Adams's and Jefferson's Christian faith. For Adams and Jefferson, poorly misinterpreted scriptures directly arose from how people read the Bible. Figures like Christopher McPherson or Nimrod Hughes exemplified those who interpreted the Bible without proper exegesis, biblical criticism, and historical context.

From an enlightened concept of the Christian faith, Adams and Jefferson viewed the Bible as a book to be critiqued for its merit and read rationally. Their critical reading of the Bible, though divergent from an evangelical's reading, represented a return to the style of analysis some of the earliest Christians used when interpreting scriptures. Adams and Jefferson were engaging in historical analysis while evangelical Christianity of the early republic did not view the Bible in the same way. Evangelicals applied biblical literalism, a way of reading the Bible that had developed during the time of Martin Luther

¹ The Athanasian Creed, a Christian statement of belief focused on Trinitarian doctrine, is the first creed in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated in the form of God, the Son and the Holy Spirit all as equal; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 13, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 356.

three hundred years earlier, when reading and interpreting the Bible. To understand how Martin Luther arrived at such an interpretation and his famous phrase “sola scriptura” – the foundation of the biblical literalist’s approach to reading the Bible in Adams and Jefferson’s day—the ancient historical context as to how to read the Bible must first be explained. The Bible was not used as the central justification for practice and belief in the Christian faith until after the start of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. While the Bible had an important role, from the first century until the invention of moveable type, it was not an easily obtainable nor easily understood set of documents. The process by which the books of the Bible were canonized should first be explained in order to demonstrate how the traditions of the Christianity developed which then led to the use of the Bible and how it was viewed.

According to David L. Dungan, the New Testament “canon” did not develop until the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.² The “canonization” process was not an established voting procedure nor one guided by divine inspiration but was a socially guided event. When Constantine (272-337 A.D.) took the throne of the Roman Empire in 306, he saw the empire was already fractured. Many different religious sects filled the Empire—Christianity being one—with hundreds of religious writings but no coherent set of scripture used as a single authority source or “canon” to guide the faith. Constantine developed an interest in Christianity, however, only after determining its political potential for preserving the Roman Empire through the unification of religious faith and thereby ordered the formal end to persecution of Christians with the Edict of Milan in

² Dungan explains that the New Testament is not a book; it is a set of several documents by different authors which comprise the “canon” of authoritative Christian writings. There were numerous other writings—gospels, letters, and narratives—which were not considered authoritative and therefore did not make the canon. See David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), ch 1 and 6.

313.³ In 331 A.D., Eusebius went to the heads of the four main sections of the church in the ancient world (Syria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Egypt) and collected fifty sets of scrolls—books—to determine those to which the churches subscribed or found important. Athanasius recorded around 340 Alexandrian scribes preparing Bibles for Constantine.⁴ The canonization process, as it was called, was based on the tradition and the custodian of these traditions of which books were read were the early church leaders. This process of determining canon said nothing about how to read the scriptures.

Origen, one of the first and earliest Church fathers, complained about Christians who read the scriptures incorrectly. To properly read the scriptures, for Origen, meant to “hold fast to the rule of Jesus Christ’s heavenly church according to the succession of the apostles.”⁵ Later, St. Augustine of Hippo (354 –430A.D.) believed the biblical text should not be literally but metaphorically interpreted, especially if the text contradicted what people knew from “science” and “our God-given reason.”⁶ In *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, Augustine took the view that everything in the universe was created simultaneously by God, and not in a literal seven-day period.⁷ In Genesis the six-day structure of creation signified a logical framework, rather than a linear passage of time. Though Augustine refused to pontificate with a definite conclusion on the matter, he seemed to settle on the view that God created the world with design to develop in such

³ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch 1.

⁴ The greater details of this story can be seen in many texts most notably: Lee M. McDonald & James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001); Lee. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995); Carter Lindberg, *A Brief History of Christianity* (Eugene: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 15; Brakke, David, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty Ninth Festal Letter," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 395–419; Dungan, *Constantine's Bible*.

⁵ R.P.C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 67-69.

⁶ “Science” was a term not coined until the seventeenth century. Here the word suggested senses or empirical views of the world or something akin to “natural philosophy.”

⁷ The literalist interpretation varied but the most common was that God created the world and universe in six days with the seventh day for rest.

a way that life would emerge, a view that might today be called theistic evolution.⁸ The reading traditions of Origen and Augustine demonstrated that varying ways to read the Bible emerged very early. From Augustine to the middle ages, however, this “liberal” tradition of understanding scriptures changed.

After the fourth century, another understanding of the Bible developed through ecclesiastical outlets, creeds, and codes. Just as the canon was hierarchically determined under Constantine, Church ideas about the development of scripture became dogmatized based on a hierarchical structure. As the church developed through the Middle Ages, when the literacy rate in the population was less than 15%, these ideas became more entrenched in society with the Church hierarchy guiding an understanding of scripture. Church leadership guided the reading of scripture until the invention of the moveable type. With the corruption of the Western Church, the Gutenberg press, the rise of the sciences, and the development of scholasticism, followers of the church began to reject the interpretative traditions of church leaders. This was the origin of Martin Luther’s phrase “sola scriptura”: the Bible itself and no other texts became the sole instrument for biblical interpretation.⁹

John Wycliffe (1320-1384), an English Scholastic philosopher, theologian, preacher, and one of the earliest challengers of papal authority, supported a translation of

⁸ One reason for this interpretation was the passage in a book of the Apocrypha, Sirach 18:1, which said *creavit omni simul* (“he created all things at once”), which Augustine took as proof that the days of Genesis 1 should not be taken literally; see Augustine of Hippo, “Of the Falseness of the History Which Allots Many Thousand Years to the World’s Past,” *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson’s Publishers, 2009), 12:10 [419]; *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, trans. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann, 1999), 377–78.

⁹ Sola Scriptura (from the Latin “by scripture alone”) suggested that the Bible alone contained all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness and that only those doctrines should be committed or confessed that are found directly within scripture or indirectly by using valid logical deduction or valid deductive reasoning from scripture.

the Bible into the common tongue as early as 1382.¹⁰ Desiderius Erasmus (1466 – 1536) created the science of textual criticism after collecting the ancient Greek texts of the New Testament in an attempt to create a more accurate and rational Greek New Testament. Separating himself from Erasmus, Martin Luther said that Erasmus, a rationalist, did not share the same “spirit” as he and John Calvin and attacked Erasmus for his “cool rationalism,” referring to this as “dirty reason.”¹¹ Luther opposed a rational interpretation of the scriptures which necessitated an understanding of the historical context of the Bible. To this Erasmus responded: “You stipulate that we should not ask for or accept anything but Holy Scripture, but you do it in such a way as to require that we permit you to be its sole interpreter, renouncing all others.”¹² At the same time William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), influenced by Erasmus and by Luther’s German translation of the Bible, set out to translate the whole New Testament into English in 1526. Tyndale’s translation of the Bible in the common tongue meant that even the “ploughboy in England” could read the Bible. Another writer in this tradition was Juan Luis Vives (1493 – 1540), a humanist and friend to Erasmus. His most important pedagogic works, *Introductio ad sapientiam* (1524), and *De disciplinis* (1531), stressed the importance of a rational interpretation of studying the Bible and represented an early demonstration of historical criticism.¹³

Guillaume Budé (1467–1540),—or Budaeus as Adams called him—a French scholar, authored *Annotationes in XXIV. libros Pandectarum* (1508), through the application

¹⁰ This translation directly from the Vulgate into vernacular English in 1382 is known as Wycliffe’s Bible; *The Reader’s Encyclopedia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), 2nd ed., 2:1105; Sol Steinmetz, *Semantic Antics: How and Why Words Change Meaning* (New York: Random House Reference, 2008).

¹¹ See Erasmus’s *The Freedom of the Will* (1524) and Luther’s response, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525); both are discussed in Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 2:106-108; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 2:95.

¹² Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes*, 1526-1527, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1:204–205.

¹³ Theory of education influenced the essays of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne; see William F. Smith, “Vives and Montaigne as Educators” in *Hispania* 29:4 (1946): 483–493.

of philology and history, and had a great influence on biblical translation. Budé corresponded with Erasmus and offered some notes on the New Testament translation he was preparing. Years later Erasmus noted Budé's excellence in biblical translation.¹⁴ Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), one of the first to argue that the Bible was a compilation of many texts by different authors with diverse backgrounds, doubted that the first five books of the Old Testament were composed entirely by Moses, as was traditionally taught.

These writers demonstrated a flexibility and liberality in biblical translation, interpretation and understanding, which departed from Martin Luther's rigid literalist reading of the Bible.¹⁵ However, the conflicts between the Protestants and Catholics and the wars that ensued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did damage in understanding the Bible.¹⁶ Initially, the New World offered a new avenue of religious expression away from this persecution and such a rigid teaching of the Bible. During the American Enlightenment, biblical understanding largely had a basis in Germany and France but also carried with it such individual and personal interpretations of the Bible as a product of the Protestant Reformation.¹⁷ Many of Europe's immigrants came to America to practice Christianity freely, which meant to follow the Bible as their specific congregation or sect interpreted it.

¹⁴ Erasmus reaffirmed the praise given to Budé in the *Novum Instrumentaum* of 1516; see David O. MacNeil, *Guillaume Budé and Humanism in the Reign of Francis I* (Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1975).

¹⁵ For more extensive church history and leaders prior and during the Reformation, see Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (The Penguin History of the Church, vol. 2), (London: Penguin Books, 1964); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁶ For greater detail see Chadwick, *The Reformatio*; MacCulloch *The Reformation*; Anthony Pagden, *Words at War: The 2,500-year Struggle Between East and West* (New York: Random House, 2008).

¹⁷ Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789* (Penguin History of the Church, vol 4), (New York: Penguin Books, 1960).

Eighteenth-century America became the incubator for liberal theology for the coming century. Religious figures like Ebenezer Gay (1696-1787), Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), and Johnathan Mayhew (1720-1766) created innovation within the relative theological stability of the Revolution. These three Congregationalist ministers put great stock in self-evident “deliverances of consciousness” and a willingness to be instructed by “a Bible liberated from its traditional conventions of interpretation.”¹⁸ This form of American theology was quickly becoming republican, as Mark Noll argues, as the unexpected alliance “between Protestant theology and republican politics” was emerging.¹⁹ As Noll recounts, in the aftermath of the decline of Puritanism in the early eighteenth century, the use of the Bible for argumentation, reason, and critical analysis was prevalent only among some individuals and churches and not among American society at large.²⁰ During the Revolutionary era, Noll writes, “the Bible continued to be a presence...but that presence was predominately rhetorical and ornamental.” The earlier colonial practice of using the Bible to argue chapter and verse for “political and virtuous behaviors” had declined.²¹

Beginning in the 1790s biblical arguments for public virtue became popular again as the Bible became more important in private life.²² Trust in the Bible alone in the years following the Revolution intensified. To understand the Bible as “The Bible alone,” as Luther proclaimed during the Protestant Reformation, changed now to “the Bible alone of all historic religious authorities.”²³ What remained, Noll recounts, was “the power of

¹⁸ Noll, *America's God*, 138-140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 370.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 371.

intuitive reason, the authority of written documents that the people approved for themselves, and the Bible alone.”²⁴ As Noll suggests, Americans made no distinction between the Bible and the Bible-as-read-in-America because they “shared...one biblical hermeneutic...[the same] hermeneutic “that unleashed the power of the Bible in the creation of American civilization.”²⁵ Part of this hermeneutic rested on the assumption that people had the right to read the entire Bible for themselves because behind this assumption was the idea that “the Bible truly revealed God.” Such assumptions fed on a reformed approach to biblical authority—“every direction contained in its pages as applicable at all times to all men”—and a distinctly American literalism that privileged commonsense readings of scriptural texts—“a literal interpretation of the Bible.”²⁶ For the enlightened and educated elite in America, however, science, biblical criticism, and history from the American Enlightenment produced the principles of reason from which an educated understanding of the scriptures would emerge.²⁷ By the later eighteenth century figures like Adams and Jefferson and especially Priestley were familiar with and subscribed to this tradition.

In the late eighteenth century Priestley’s most noteworthy contribution to theology was his distinctive approach to studying the Christian scriptures: that the Bible should be in a continual state of improvement, very different from the evangelical interpretation. Priestley approached scriptural study with exactness and rationality, which led to a rational and evidential view that denounced the mystery and irrationality

²⁴ Ibid, 367-375.

²⁵ Ibid., 373.

²⁶ Ibid, 367-385.

²⁷ For the effects of science on religion during this era, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Richard G. Olsen, *Science & Religion: From Copernicus to Darwin, 1450-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Peter Watson, *The German Genius* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

of orthodox theology like the Trinity. Priestley developed an enlightened and rational critical process for studying the scriptures and studied history to explain the manner by which Christianity became corrupted over the centuries as misunderstandings in interpreting the scripture emerged and distorted the “pure” beliefs of the early church.²⁸ Priestley argued that Christianity, in its origin, was a simple religion corrupted by the early church authorities in an effort to make it respectable to pagans and church clergy to hold power over the laity. For Priestley, the essence of Christianity could be summed up in plain propositions: There was one God who had given Jesus the special mission of revealing his true nature to the world, and of teaching men how to live virtuous lives.²⁹ This rational style of reading the scriptures had an especially profound effect on Jefferson in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

As Dickinson W. Adams has noted, Jefferson was reluctant to reveal his religious beliefs with anyone. He was so convinced that religion was a private matter that he once rebuked someone trying to gather religious information from him for a biographical sketch stating, “say nothing of my religion...it is known to my god and myself alone.”³⁰ The evidentialist Christianity which Jefferson animated in his religion conflicted with organized Christianity whose emphasis was upon the value of the supernatural revelation, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority.³¹ As Dickinson Adams states, the rationalistic form of Christianity “was far less prominent in the American Enlightenment than in its European counterpart,” but in the case of Jefferson the “spirit of critical analysis” and the

²⁸ Elizabeth Kingston, “Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published August, 2008, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/priestly/>

²⁹ Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (London: Woodfall and Kinder, 1871).

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Delaplaine, December 25, 1816, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), 9:459.

³¹ Holifield speaks more of the evidentialist spirit of Christianity and different sects interpretation of it in *Theology in America*, 210, 243, 360, 275, 299.

“traditional tenets of Christianity” was one central theme to his religious system. For Jefferson, reason and rationality, not supernatural revelation or ecclesiastical authority, became the judge of religious truth.³² Jefferson became the champion of religious freedom when, in the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he wrote “Religion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough; all sufficient to preserve peace and good order.”³³

Yet despite Jefferson’s leading role in the campaign to separate church and state in Virginia, his personal views of religion became a factor in the election of 1800. Since Jefferson was cautious about sharing his religious views, Federalists selected specific passages from *Notes on the State of Virginia* to demonstrate Jefferson’s hostility toward religion. These charges of irreligiousness against Jefferson started a chain reaction which led him to compose the “Syllabus...of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus” and the “The Philosophy of Jesus,” in 1803 and 1804. As Dickinson Adams suggests, Jefferson was also motivated to “guarantee the perpetuation of republican government” in the republic at a time when “political factionalism and social disharmony” threatened its foundations.³⁴ At just the time when public attacks were accumulating, Jefferson began to articulate a more sympathetic view of Christianity influenced by his reading of Priestley’s *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* sometime in the late 1790s.³⁵ Jefferson adopted specific points from Priestley’s text later describing the work as a

³² Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5.

³³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 159-160.

³⁴ Adams, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 13.

³⁵ Adams, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 14.

foundation for his view on religion and the basis for his faith.³⁶ The work that had the most influence on Jefferson was Priestley's *Socrates and Jesus Compared*, published in 1803. Priestley argued that Jesus and Socrates were very similar: both poor, virtuous men who strove to persuade others to live virtuously and who submitted to a higher power.³⁷ Having received a copy in 1803, Jefferson was impressed and though he remained unconvinced by Priestley's contention that "the founder of Christianity has been divinely inspired and endowed with supernatural powers," he agreed that the moral precepts of Jesus "as taught by himself and freed from the corruptions of later times" were superior to all other systems of morality.³⁸ A few days after reading *Socrates and Jesus*, Jefferson sent a letter to Priestley in which he praised the work and implored Priestley to write on the subject "on a more extensive scale."³⁹ To help facilitate Priestley's work, Jefferson outlined the work he wanted to write but which was more suited for the Unitarian Minister to accomplish. Jefferson's view was to "take a general view of the moral doctrines ...of ancient philosophers... then take a view of the deism and ethics of the Jews, and shew in what a degraded state they were, and the necessity they presented of a reformation... [then] proceed to the view of the life, character , and doctrines of Jesus... which would purposely omit the question of his divinity and even of his inspiration..."⁴⁰ Only after all this, for Jefferson, would it be possible to depict Jesus in his true historic role as a moral reformer. Despite the disrepair into which original Christianity had fallen, according to Jefferson, he was confident that a work "accurately

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Joseph Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1994), 1-3, 33-34.

³⁸ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Dowse, April 19, 1803, in *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*, 329.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

describing the authentic doctrines of Jesus, restoring them to their original purity and simplicity and eliminating the corruptions of later ages” would convince the greatest skeptic that Christian morality was superior to any alternative.⁴¹ Two weeks after writing to Priestley, Jefferson composed his "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus" describing his attitude toward Christianity in a letter to Benjamin Rush⁴² on April 21, 1803. Jefferson explained to Priestley that his syllabus “gave the substance of a view I take of the morality taught by the ancient philosophers and Jesus...and [that he] sent it to Dr. [Benjamin] Rush in performance of the promise I had formerly made him.”⁴³ This syllabus was Jefferson’s only formal expression of his demythologized Christian faith, developed by the influence of Priestley’s writings, and he adhered to it for the rest of his life. A rational critique of the scriptural writings to determine the true teachings of Jesus, Jefferson’s “syllabus” was not written to determine Jesus’s merits, but to determine the worth of the doctrines that emerged from the days of Jesus.⁴⁴ For Jefferson, this was the result of “a life of inquiry and reflection,” very different from the “anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions.”⁴⁵

The response from Rush and Priestley was not what Jefferson hoped for. On May 5, 1803, Rush wrote to Jefferson that he “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

⁴¹ Adams, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 23.

⁴² Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 331-336.

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, April 24, 1803, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 336.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁴⁵ John Adams to Benjamin Rush: Aug. 22, 1800, April 21, 1803, and May 5, 1803 and “syllabus” found in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 317, 331, and 338.

by your enemies.”⁴⁶ From Jefferson’s outline Rush could see Jefferson’s basic beliefs in God and in Jesus which was enough to place Jefferson in the category of a man of God. But Rush disagreed with Jefferson on a different important point saying that while he agreed with “your account of the character and mission of the author of our Religion.”⁴⁷ Jefferson’s description of Jesus—as an agent of God rather than being divine himself—was not consistent with Rush’s definition of Jesus. Therefore, for Rush, “in the mean while we will agree, to disagree.”⁴⁸ For Jefferson, Rush’s reaction was “at first slightly disappointing...[but] in the end [was] a source of great satisfaction to him.”⁴⁹ Priestley more gently rejected Jefferson’s notion that Jesus “never laid claim to a divine mission.”⁵⁰ Priestley wrote his words more carefully and treated Jefferson’s ideas as an honest difference of opinion and found nothing to criticize in Jefferson’s view of Christianity.

Jefferson was encouraged by these letters enough to begin extracting the passages from the Gospels that he regarded as expressive of the authentic teachings of Jesus. Early in 1804 Jefferson completed his first collection of *Gospel Extracts*—“The Philosophy of Jesus”—and early in August wrote to Rush in the hopes of testing the acceptability of his rationalistic version of the Christian message asking him to read “The Philosophy of Jesus.”⁵¹ Rush’s reply, more than Priestley’s, must have been an unexpected disappointment: he sternly told Jefferson that though he “would receive with pleasure the publication you have promised me upon the character of the Messiah...unless it advances

⁴⁶ Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, May 5, 1803, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 337.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Adams, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 26.

⁵⁰ Joseph Priestley to Thomas Jefferson, May 7, 1803, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 338-339.

⁵¹ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, Aug. 8, 1804, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 341.

it to divinity and renders his death as well as his life necessary for the restoration of mankind, I shall not accord with its author.”⁵² Jefferson decided not to send it to Rush after all and never again mentioned the subject in his correspondence with Rush. While Priestley influenced Jefferson, vestiges of the history of how to read the Bible can be seen in the words Adams and Jefferson shared with each other between 1812 and 1826.

Adams and Jefferson took an interest in what they saw as false interpretations of the scriptures over the centuries and how these resulted in the specific religious beliefs of their day, such as the beliefs in the millennium, prophecy, or the Trinity. Many of their letters attempted to reformulate how biblical principles ought to be properly understood based on a rational and enlightened interpretation of the scriptures.⁵³ This evidentialist view of Christianity, as Holifield suggests, was not common and was considered contentious by mainstream congregations and theologians at the time. Both Adams and Jefferson mentioned the continued corruptions that dominated religious writings until their present age. Throughout the correspondence several opportunities emerged for both Adams and Jefferson to describe a properly conceived and well reasoned Christian faith.

In his letter to Jefferson on July 16, 1813, Adams referred to Jefferson’s letters to Priestley—copies of which Jefferson had sent to Adams—in which Jefferson laid out his “plan” for “the Christian Philosophy.”⁵⁴ Adams was aware of and had read some of the letters between Jefferson and Priestley and related them back to Jefferson for comment. Adams admired and agreed with Jefferson’s plan for Christianity and then copied most of Jefferson’s letter to Priestley in order to provide comment. Adams acknowledged

⁵² Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson, August 29, 1804, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 29.

⁵³ Gregg L. Frazer coins the term “theistic rationalism” to describe their religion. I believe the term is more appropriate to describe what they are doing, not what they should be called.

⁵⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, March 21, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 359-360.

Jefferson's views of and his "plan" for a "reasonable" Christian faith and he also reminded Jefferson of the simplicity and accuracy of his words.⁵⁵ Jefferson and Adams both acknowledged that the teachings of Jesus were written by "the most unlettered Men, by memory, long after they had hear them from him, when much as forgotten, much misunderstood... but that Jesus's system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime... that has ever been taught."⁵⁶ Both men recognized that from history, poor critique, religious enthusiasm, and the Church, "[Jesus's] character and doctrines, have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special Disciples."⁵⁷

Adams questioned how much Priestley read literalism into the Bible. Adams states that Priestley and Lindsay "believed in the Resurrection of Jesus, in his miracles and his inspiration."⁵⁸ Adams asked whether the belief in a literal understanding of the scripture was what legitimized a Christian. "But what inspiration?" Adams continued, "...surely not all that is recorded in the New Testament, nor the old."⁵⁹ He recounted that Priestley and Lindsey never told "how much Allegory how much Parable they find, nor how they explain them all, in the Old Testament or the new."⁶⁰ Adams was defending Jefferson much as Priestley had, while also condemning Priestley for his "literal" reading of the Bible. Priestley and Lindsey, he alluded, interpreted the scriptures rationally, arrived at conclusions, and were still considered men of faith. It should be no different for Jefferson, Adams insinuated. In the same letter Adams asked Jefferson, "...how

⁵⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 359.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 360.

much did [Priestley] ‘unbelieve’ himself?”⁶¹ Priestley believed in the resurrection of Jesus and some of his miracles, but Priestley was skeptical of Jesus’ inspiration. Adams suggested this was the flaw in Priestley’s faith: he was inconsistent and “scanty.”⁶² Priestley “did not believe in the Inspiration of the Writings that contain [Jesus’] History,”⁶³ yet believed in the “Apocalyptic Beast” of Revelation, which was written by an Apostle of Jesus supporting an inspired vision from God.⁶⁴ The inconsistency for Adams was not about believing in the writings of Jesus but believing in the inspiration of Revelation in one breadth while denying the inspiration in the writings of Jesus’s history. A rational and enlightened approach to understanding the scriptures would dictate a consistent interpretation of the writing. Adams told Jefferson that “I am not wholly uninformed of the Controversies in Germany and the learned Researches of Universities and Professors; in which the Sanctity of the Bible and the Inspiration of its Authors are waived; or admitted, or not denied.”⁶⁵ Adams was aware of the German Biblical scholarship that suggested non-literal interpretations of the Bible. At the close of the letter Adams was even more explicit in his acceptance of Jefferson’s thinking: “I Agree with you . . . Most cordially and I think solidly” in Jefferson’s readings of the scriptures and his outline of the Christian faith.⁶⁶ Jefferson and Adams both respected Priestley, though they did not agree with all of his theology.

Jefferson responded on August 22, 1813 thanking Adams for his appraisal of the outline. He recalled that “I very much suspect that if thinking men would have the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Adams made a reference here suggesting that “Gibbon had [Priestley] right when he denominated his Creed, “Scanty”; see letter to Jefferson, July 18, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 361.

⁶³ Meaning he didn’t believe that the Apostles of Jesus were inspired.

⁶⁴ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 18, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 361.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 362.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

courage to think for themselves, and to speak what they think, it would be found they do not differ in religious opinions, as much as is supposed.”⁶⁷ Jefferson had been silent about the topic of religion since his letter to Benjamin Rush in 1803. He did not return to his personal views on religion until the letter to Adams in which he enclosed his syllabus “with entire confidence” for it to be “perused by yourself and Mrs. Adams, but by no one else.”⁶⁸

In 1816 Jefferson once again spelled out a proper system of biblical critique. Jefferson commented on a book by David Levi, a Jewish writer in London, saying the book was “tough work,” was “inelegant and incorrect,” and that his “reasoning is flimsey.”⁶⁹ He explained that Levi “takes passages of Scripture from their context (which would give them a very different meaning) strings them together, and makes them point toward what object he pleases; he interprets them figuratively, typically, analogically, hyperbolically; he calls in the aid of emendation, transposition, ellipsis, metonymy and every other figure of rhetoric.”⁷⁰ Jefferson continued to renounce Levi’s different critical errors in interpreting the scripture. Jefferson’s rational and evidentialist reading of scripture was important in grasping a rational understanding of the text.

Jefferson had already responded to Adams in critiquing the morality of the Jewish faith in general. He discussed the different writings of the Jews like “Mishna, their Gemara, Cabala, Jezirah, Sohar, Cosri and their Talmud” in trying to understand their

⁶⁷ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 22, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 368.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ In 1786, Joseph Priestley published his *Letter to the Jews* (1786), urging them to convert. Levi published a response, which led to many arguments with Christian divines. This led to his three-volume *Dissertation on the Prophecies of the Old Testament* (1793–1800), which he printed and published himself; Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 147.

⁷⁰ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 469.

“morals.” Two modern writers, Brucker and Enfield, concluded that “...Ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that, in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise on moral subjects....”⁷¹ Jefferson goes on to suggest the moral depravity of the Jews, the 613 precepts of Moses and the actions of the Jews in the Middle Ages. Jefferson brought up the morality of the Jews suggesting it was “the reformation of this ‘wretched depravity’ that Jesus undertook. In extracting the pure principles which he [Jesus] taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests...” Jefferson suggested that Jesus was reforming the Jewish thinking, and that, those interested in a proper interpretation must “strip off the artificial” understanding of the words and codes that the priests created around such “pure beliefs.”⁷² Jefferson was critiquing both the Jews and the Catholic priesthood who he argued corrupted the message of God in their interpretations, while people who read the scripture since also corrupted the message by not reading the scriptures rationally. He suggested to Adams what a rational reading of the scriptures entailed: “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...”⁷³

Jefferson then outlined how the scriptures were to be read. “...We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologism into which they had been led by forgetting often, or

⁷¹ Jefferson is referring to the writers Johann Jakob Brucker and William Enfield, who wrote *The History of Philosophy: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Present Century* (1791), which argues that the Jews preserved the unity of God. Jefferson denounced the book as it does not exegete New Testament theory correctly; Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct. 12, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 383.

⁷² Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 468.

⁷³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct. 12, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 383.

not understanding, what had fallen from him the dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves.”⁷⁴ Jefferson believed that even the apostles of Jesus (the evangelists) embellished the words of Jesus and that which they wrote—the four gospels only—needed to be carefully scrutinized. Jefferson suspected that the apostles gave “Their own misconceptions as...there will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”⁷⁵ In order to understand the true teachings of Jesus, all the corruption and all the codes, creeds, and doctrines which emerged after the first century must be eliminated. Jefferson told Adams he had already “performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the print book and arranging, the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”⁷⁶ This scriptural critique was Jefferson’s true appreciation for the true teachings of Jesus. What did Jefferson come up with? “The result is an 8 vo. Of 46 pages of pure and unsophisticated doctrines, [The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth] such as were professed and acted on by the *unlettered* apostles, the Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1st century.” But Jefferson acknowledged the corruptions came later. “Their Platonising successors indeed, in after times, in order to legitimate the corruptions which they had incorporated into 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 cotemporary with them.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ This is what is called the Jefferson Bible.

⁷⁷ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct. 12, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 383.

The conversation Adams and Jefferson had regarding Priestley was about how to contextualize Priestley's interpretation of the Bible. They used the Bible as their source of critique and argument, determining that Priestley was not as rational in his interpretation as both Adams and Jefferson first suspected. Just as Adams and Jefferson viewed the Bible rationally and arrived at criticism of Priestley's view of religion, so did they also apply such reasoning to other historical figures and how those figures viewed and interpreted scripture.

Both Adams and Jefferson responded to and mimicked the writers of the Reformation period, whom they respected and saw as rational and reasonable people. Adams suggested who some of those great modernists were who tried to find truth in religion. By approaching the scriptures using reason, Adams saw the "the Pope and his Church [believe] too much" about the authenticity and truth of scripture as they believed all of the scripture was from God, while "Luther and his Church believed too little" by not looking to the historical context or other sources.⁷⁸ Adams did see a "Triumvirate" of "Great scholars" who attempted to apply criticism to the Bible: Erasmus, Vives and Budeus. Adams turned to Vives to explain the early writings of early church founders. He quoted Vives: "much was written about the actions of men like Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Scipio Pompey, and Caesar 'written and fixed in an everlasting Remembrance'" so that their ideas would never be lost.⁷⁹ Yet when it came to the Christian faith, specifically the "Acts of the Apostles and Martyrs and Saints...and of the Affairs of the rising and established Church," much was unknown and uncertain for

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Adams.⁸⁰ Adams mentioned how Vives wrote “of these holy men, except a very few things is very much corrupted and defaced with the mixture of many fables.”⁸¹ Adams asked Jefferson what more “could be invented to debase the ancient Christianity” which the other ancients—Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Christian factions, and above all the Catholics—have not already done?”⁸² Adams suggested that even before Constantine there were corruptions for “Miracles after Miracles have rolled down in torrents, Wave succeeding Wave, in the Catholic Church from the Council of Nice and long before, to this day” which Adams found suspect.⁸³ Those who wished to know the Bible should understand the faith of the ancients apart from the corruptions that occurred ever since. In trying to decipher the ancients’ understanding of the scriptures, Adams turned to the Old Testament to compare it with the New Testament.

Jefferson and Adams, products of the Enlightenment, noticed that a few theologians had compared the interpretation of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament. Noticing an example of someone who had tried to explain this comparison, Adams wrote a letter critiquing Goethe, the German scholar, who wrote a five-volume piece between 1775 and 1779, the fourth and fifth volume of which critiqued the Ten Commandments.⁸⁴ Adams described how Goethe recalculated and discussed a different version of the Ten Commandments. Adams presented this rewritten text in his letter, asking Jefferson, “...among all your researches in Hebrew History and Controversy have you ever met a book” such as this. Adams explained the purpose of the book was to

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 404.

⁸³ Ibid., 404 - 405.

⁸⁴ This was one of the earliest collected editions of Goethe’s Writings, which was not authorized by him, and was first issued by C.F. Himberg in these volumes in Berlin, 1775.

prove that the Ten Commandments were not the “ten commandments written by the Finger of God...but a very different Sett of Commandments...”⁸⁵ Adams recognized the similarity of the version Goethe presented and that of the scripture found in the Bible. While they appeared the “same in a few places they are different from the traditional written version found in the Old Testament.” Adams’s commented that while this writing of the Ten Commandments differed from “Exodus 34.10-28...the sense is the same...”⁸⁶ Questions arose even during the rabbinic period (250 BC-400AD) over this same issue. Origen, the Christian writer (220 AD) answered people’s objections to the Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy. Some scholars in Spain and France had noticed, since the eleventh century, that there were problems with the Book of Deuteronomy. Spinoza, one major objector who used a critical analysis approach, stated outright that Moses did not write much of the Penteteuch.⁸⁷ In this point about Deuteronomy, Adams demonstrated a critical and rational approach to reading the scriptures. In the letter, Adams then asked a more difficult question about rational biblical criticism: “when and where originated our Ten Commandments?” With biblical background and thinking, Adams suggested that if the book of “Deuteronomy was compiled, during or after the Babilonian Captivity, from Traditions” it could have been there that error may have emerged.⁸⁸ Adams was aware of the theological significance and historical tradition of Deuteronomy and the fact that Moses may not have been the author of the first five books of the Bible; a point with which evangelicals of the early republic would not have agreed. Knowing about the alternative authorship of this part of the Bible demonstrated Adams’s familiarity with the

⁸⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 14 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 395.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁸⁷ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 17-21.

⁸⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 14 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 396.

German school of biblical scholarship where this view originated. It was a minority view, held mostly by professional theologians and a surprising one for Adams to believe.

Adams did two things in this letter. First, he cited German theological, critical scholarship, an interpretation of the Bible foreign to provincial Christians of the early republic. Second, he noticed that the “Ten Commandments” were evidence of the covenant God made with his people and by which God “attached the People of Israel to himself” and that these commandments served to separate the Jews from other nations.⁸⁹

Adams was making a complex theological point in understanding that the Ten Commandments did not apply to Christians but that they only served to separate the Jews in the ancient world. This was not a point that contemporary enthusiasts and mass Christian culture would have understood or welcomed at the time. Yet these were the kinds of interpretations Adams and Jefferson were sharing with one another. These were representative of an evidentialist and rational approach to reading the Bible, one not widely accepted.

Three years later, on August 30, 1816, another Enlightenment thinker in the new republic, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), preached an impromptu sermon upon invitation by the Brush Run Baptist Church of the Redstone Association in Cross Creek, Virginia. He publicly made the same point that Adams privately made in his letter to Jefferson: that Christians were obligated to follow the law of the New Testament and not the law of the Old Testament. As a result, Campbell was excommunicated from the association and widely condemned as a heretic.⁹⁰ Campbell was charged with being “dangerous” and “without religion.” Like Adams and Jefferson, Campbell felt that “the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Elmer Prout, “Alexander Campbell and the Old Testament,” *The Restoration Quarterly* 6 (July 1962): 131-142.

present popular exhibition of Christianity is a compound of Judaism, Heathen Philosophy, and Christianity; which, like the materials in Nebuchadnezzar's image, does not well cement together."⁹¹ As Elmer Prout has suggested, Campbell's "Sermon on the Law was a clear break with the common religious thinking" of the early republic.⁹² Adams and Jefferson, however close their rational reading of the Bible was to Campbell's, withheld this point from the public, only sharing such thoughts with each other.

Jefferson responded to the questions of Adams's November 14, 1813 about Goethe saying he had not seen the works of "J.W. Goethens." Similar to Adams's inquiries about comparing the Old Testament and New Testament, Jefferson provided a critique of the language and sources of the Old Testament compared with that of the New Testament. Jefferson questioned where the Ten Commandments themselves originated since supposedly "they were written by the finger of god on tables of stone" and it was never recounted how the commandments were recovered."⁹³ Jefferson noted that "sources" were very important, and that "the whole history of these books is so defective and doubtful that it seems vain to attempt minute enquiry into it."⁹⁴ For Jefferson these books had been inspected so much that it was questionable "what parts of them are genuine" and which parts were false.⁹⁵ Jefferson related this same issue of authorship back to the New Testament, saying "there is internal evidence that parts of it have proceeded from an extraordinary man; and that other parts are of the fabric of very

⁹¹ Charles Alexander Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Chicago: The Christian Century Company, 1904), 222.

⁹² Prout, "Alexander Campbell and the Old Testament," 142.

⁹³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Jan. 24, 1814, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 421.

⁹⁴ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Nov. 14, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 394-397.

⁹⁵ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Jan. 24, 1814, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 421.

inferior minds.”⁹⁶ To distinguish the authentic words of scripture from those words that had been added was the most difficult procedure for Jefferson. In attempting such a task Jefferson was using a form of rational biblical criticism to arrive at Jesus’s pure teachings. “It is as easy to separate those parts, as to pick out diamonds from dunghills...the first...would be preserved in the memory of the hearers, and handed on my tradition...the latter...might be gathered up, for imbedding it, anywhere, and at any time.”⁹⁷

Later in the letter Jefferson offered a thorough historical criticism of previous works that attempted to interpret biblical scripture, stating how important it was to cite sources and authors. Writers did not do this, Jefferson lamented, and thus many ideas and thoughts were based on false ideas, “hanging by one another on a single hook, a mistranslation by Finch of the words of Prisot, or on nothing. For all quote Prisot, or one another, or nobody.”⁹⁸ A few sentences later he suggested how one might look at the Bible mattered: “...and who now can question but that the whole Bible and Testament are a part of the Common law?” For Adams and Jefferson it was necessary clear about how corruptions in the Christian faith occurred: through mistranslation of scriptures and of sources and through a literalist rather than a critical reading of the scriptures.

Adams and Jefferson also questioned morality and ethics in the Jewish tradition comparing them to the ideas of Jesus and the Christian religion. Adams first inquired

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 422-423; Here Jefferson wrote two pages of his letter going into great detail about authorship and historical criticism. Jefferson started this discussion with a case reported in the “Year Book”—which covered the period of Edward I (1292) through Henry VIII (1536)—where the question was “how far the Common law takes notice of the Ecclesiastical law.” The answer was that “Prisot, Chief Justice said: to such laws of the church as have warrant in ancient writing our law giveth credence.” Later in the letter Jefferson made the point that Finch mistranslated Prisot but this corrupted the message from then on.

about this topic in a letter to Jefferson comparing the ethics of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament. “I have not seen any Work which expressly compared the Morality of the Old Testament with that of the New...nor either with that of the ancient Philosop[h]ers” Adams said.⁹⁹ Here Adams constructed a theological parallel in comparing these two traditions and their ethical systems by viewing the scriptures of both traditions. He saw Jefferson would be better able to compare these traditions given his theological knowledge. He was also attempting to motivate Jefferson to write more about Jesus.¹⁰⁰ Adams was not suggesting that any system of thinking or morality was as good as any other. He recognized that the Jewish system was deficient when compared to the ethics of Jesus as Jefferson himself suggested later: “...no two things [the Old Testament and the New Testament] were ever more unlike.”¹⁰¹ Instead, Adams and Jefferson were determining an intellectual system of morality derived from the Ancients and passed down through the generations, in one form or another, until the time of Jesus in the form of the scriptures.

As Adams and Jefferson wrote to each other in the early republic, “belief in the Scriptures as God’s inspired word was nearly universal,” Noll argues.¹⁰² God’s inspired word could never be tampered with, changed or altered based on biblical teachings. To divide the Bible into parts—some of which were inspired and some not directly inspired for instance—created problems and controversies which could lead to heresy and

⁹⁹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Aug 9, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 364.

¹⁰⁰ In this letter, Adams copied an extract of a letter of Joseph Priestley to Lindsey which commented on Revelation and compared the ancient philosophers with Jesus. From this Adams told Jefferson he was sending him this letter as he was hoping it would “stimulate You, to pursue Your own plan which you promised to Dr. Rush,” Jefferson’s “Syllabus of the Doctrine of Jesus.” In the next sentence Adams inquired whether morality in the Old Testament and the New Testament has ever been compared.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 368.

¹⁰² Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann, 1992), 232.

excommunication.¹⁰³ In trying to apply rationality to their faith, Adams's and Jefferson's enlightened approach to religion ran counter to that of most churchgoing Americans.

Adams and Jefferson were unusually aware that the Old Testament was separate from the New Testament and that the doctrine, though interesting and informative, was not binding on Christians.

¹⁰³ An example was Alexander Campbell being kicked out of church.

Conclusion

Both Adams and Jefferson saw religion as an important element in the republic. They also recognized how corruptions and misinterpretations in religion disturbed a religion's true message. In 1817, Adams suggested that "this would be the best of all possible worlds if there was not Religion in it" meaning that popular religion in society corrupted the populace and led to a weak understanding of faith. Two sentences later Adams wrote, "Without Religion this World would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company, I mean hell."¹ Adams was not contradicting himself: a world without an articulate and rational understanding of faith would be horrible. A few weeks later Jefferson responded by explicitly stating how "religion" was corrupt. He said to Adams, "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 all possible worlds if there was no religion in it.'"² By "sectarian dogmas" Jefferson meant poorly critiqued or read scripture, which resulted in creeds or dogmas transmitted over generations. Jefferson agreed with Adams: religion should not be constructed upon false doctrine but upon a solid understanding of scripture. Jefferson recognized that "religion" was the outward and material show of Church. Jefferson continued: "but if the moral precepts, innate in man, and made a part of his physical constitution, as necessary for a social being, if the sublime doctrines of philanthropism and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth in which all agree, constitute true religion, then, without it, this would be, as you again say, 'something not fit to be named, even indeed a Hell'."³ Jefferson and

¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, April 19, 1817, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 509.

² Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, May 5, 1817, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 513.

³ *Ibid.*

Adams were trying to arrive at a pure religious faith by reasoning through the scriptures. Several more conclusions can be drawn from contextualizing the letters between Adams and Jefferson.

First, analyzing Adams's and Jefferson's letters with a particular focus on religion demonstrates that these statesmen were not so reticent about their beliefs, nor were they unspecific about their faith. As they themselves indicated in several letters, they were cautious about sharing their beliefs with the American public because they were uncertain of the reception their beliefs would have, not because they were uncertain about their beliefs.⁴ The frequency and depth with which Adams and Jefferson approached religion suggests it was a matter of deep importance to these statesmen. Their religious perspective was too radical for the era. As this study suggests, like Frazer's recent work, Adams and Jefferson believed themselves to be some type of reasonable and rational Christians. Both shared an articulate, educated, and well-supported belief in their religion. Adams's and Jefferson's religious beliefs were not scattered, representing an unspecific religious faith. If this had been the case, they would not have arrived at similar theological conclusions. Their letters are not representative of an imprecise and confused discussion of religion; they instead show a developed foundation from which religion could be articulated and questioned. This articulated faith represented a critiqued, evidential, rational conception of religion not predominantly found in the early republic, though it could be seen in a few others such as Alexander Campbell. The cautiousness to which some—Noll, Holmes, Waldman—have referred was only the result

⁴ While not the focus of this thesis, they discuss this subject several times: six letters in 1813, five letters in 1822. They did not wish to have these letters published as they made clear in three letters: John Adams to Thomas Jefferson June 20, 1815, and Aug. 24, 1815, and Thomas Jefferson to John Adams Aug. 10, 1815, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 446, 452-453, 455.

of apprehension about sharing their faith with the American people.⁵ Jefferson argued for this faith the best when “I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know.”⁶

The second point that can be drawn from contextualizing the letters says something about the type of Christians Adams and Jefferson were: rational and evidentialist. Just as they drew from sources in history and philosophy to justify their American Enlightenment writings during the Revolution, so too did they draw from historical and philosophical sources to guide their discussion of arguments for a justification of rational religious faith. Adams and Jefferson saw a reasoned and critiqued faith as representative of Jesus’s teachings. Adams and Jefferson agreed on religious issues and ideas even as they disagreed on political and historical issues. They arrived at similar religious conclusions based on their education and reading of religious history. They were aware of the historical and biblical corruptions that had developed over time, and they demonstrated a greater understanding in deciphering the corruptions from the true religious beliefs of the era, more especially than the enthusiastic religion so popular in American society. They rejected some commonly held religious views—the second coming, the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the literalist approach to interpreting the Bible—based on a rational and evidentialist approach to reading the Bible using history, language, and context to guide their critique. Adams and Jefferson were amateur intellectuals in religion and theology, a subject with which they are rarely associated.

Adams and Jefferson were Christians, but not in a sense that would have been recognized in the early republic. They would have said they represented the true teachings of what the church should have been: they were followers of Jesus, without the

⁵ Jefferson’s letters to Benjamin Rush in 1803 gave him such a cause.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles Ely, June 25, 1819, in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, 386-387.

false creeds and doctrines. They rejected the Trinity, the millennium, Jesus's divinity, and a literalist approach to reading the Bible. They accepted the simple teachings of Jesus as the basis for their faith.

A third conclusion can be drawn about what these letters say about Christianity of the era. From their questions and inquiries about their faith, Adams and Jefferson reassessed their Christian views and arrived at a different understanding of evangelical Christianity from what was popular in the republic. Their words suggested that Christianity had been corrupted by false doctrine over the centuries. However, their intentions were not to change the Christian church. Jefferson commented that both his and Adams's time to contribute to such theological discussions had passed. Instead they must "leave therefore to others, young and more learned than we are, to prepare this euthanasia for Platonic Christianity, and its restoration to the primitive simplicity of its founder."⁷ These statesmen were not reformulating Christianity to fit a universal faith for all, but they reformulated their personal beliefs to fit an enlightened sense of faith. Neither man acknowledged that he was a Unitarian, Theist, or Deist, or Atheist. Acknowledging the validity and reason behind Unitarianism would not necessitate full adherence to that theological system. Jefferson said it best, and Adams echoed it in his words: they saw themselves "restoring" the Christian faith to the "primitive simplicity" which Jesus taught for their own personal religious faith. As willing as Jefferson was to drop this issue of the true faith of Jesus, ten years later he did complete, for his personal edification, the *Teachings and Morals of Jesus*. Apparently he was not willing to let

⁷ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct 12, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 385.

“young minds” accomplish this task completely without guidance, and Adams was a major motivator for Jefferson’s completion of his syllabus.⁸

Adams and Jefferson were two rationalistic followers of religion, reticent about sharing their beliefs with a public that would surely not understand them, but vehemently opposed to those who tried to make the Christian faith something they believed it was not. They continued their dialogue about the scripture, recognizing the impact poorly understood scripture would have on the republic. These corruptions, they thought, would lead the people to a more nebulous and less fulfilled understanding of faith. They hoped, for themselves, that their rational faith would permeate the culture of the new republic.

These two statesmen shared a specific religious vision for the early American republic which was not realized even as they lay on their deathbeds. Adams’s and Jefferson’s letters were exchanged with a personal interest in religious ideas, but seen in their appropriate historical context, these letters were a part of a larger historical discussion in the post-Revolutionary era. This conversation, to which Robert M.S. McDonald refers and about which Nathan Hatch explicitly writes, was overshadowed by the emotionalism of the Second Great Awakening.⁹ Adams’s and Jefferson’s rational, evidentialistic religious faith did not find favor during this era as enthusiastic evangelicalism became the dominant spiritual mode of religious expression in the nineteenth century.

⁸ Six letters in 1813 and another in 1816 support this.

⁹ Robert M.S. McDonald, “Was There a Religious Revolution of 1800?” in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, edited by James P. P. Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 173-198; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

In the new republic, one idea that reigned supreme was the notion that people's liberty also affected how they read the Bible. From this freedom, the period from the Revolution through the new republic witnessed a huge outpouring of new sects emerging from an "unfettered interpretation of the Scripture."¹⁰ Some historians of religion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest that the enthusiasm of the First Great Awakening was redirected into a more aggressive patriotism of the American Revolution as this religious language was entrenched in specific millennial themes.¹¹ As Mark Noll describes, early nineteenth-century Americans emphasized an understanding of Christianity using the Bible alone which led to a much more "democratic style of evangelization" of the culture which also led to a "democratization of Christianity."¹² This specific blend of Christianity and of democratic republicanism, Noll offers, helped shape the American religious culture of the early republic.¹³ This Christianized form of the Enlightenment became the driving intellectual force for the established community in the country. Combined with the Scottish Enlightenment School of "common sense" philosophy, "enlightened Christianity" guided a reasoned understanding of scripture and the Bible which reestablished the truths of Christianity in the absence of a firmly established priesthood or church. But "rational Christianity" was not the dominant form of Christian thought by 1815. Quixotic figures in a new era, Adams and Jefferson were

¹⁰ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 185.

¹¹ For more thorough detail see Bloch, *Visionary Republic*; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

¹² *Ibid.*; for a fuller expression of this religious ideology, see also Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*.

¹³ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*; Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*.

destined to watch as enthusiastic religion and evangelicalism began to sweep the country through the last ten years of their lives while rational faith slowly faded.

In his edition of the correspondence, Lester J. Cappon admits that “Adams and Jefferson corresponded year after year, never casting doubt on the momentous decision of 1776 but never believing that achievements could be assured without eternal vigilance.”¹⁴ Adams’s and Jefferson’s letters critiquing their faith and questioning religion represented this type of eternal vigilance. While Adams and Jefferson increasingly lamented in their remaining years, they took solace in each other and in their ardent “Christian faith” knowing their lives had been an expression of that devoted faith and the desperate attempt to restore it to America. Historians can only suppose that perhaps on their deathbeds, on the same day, July 4 1826, these were two Americans who “loved the Workman” and had spent their lives “trying to improve His work” even if they only shared it with each other.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, xxxiii.

¹⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 28, 1812, in *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 310.

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