



THE RATIONALIST

AUGUST 15, 1915

Volume 4, No. 4.

THE RELIGION OF Washington, Jefferson and Franklin

Reproduced in electronic form
1999

Bank of Wisdom[®] LLC
P.O. Box 926
Louisville, KY 40201 U.S.A.

M. M. MANGASARIAN

REPORT OF A LECTURE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE
INDEPENDENT RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

1915
Majestic Theatre
CHICAGO

PAST NUMBERS OF THE RATIONALIST

- No. 1. St. Francis, the Second Christ.
- No. 2. Marcus Aurelius.
- No. 3. Ships That Sink in the Night, or God and the Titanic.
- No. 4. What Has Christ Done for the World?
- No. 5. Lyman Abbott on Immortality.
- No. 6. Voltaire in Hades.
- No. 7. The Gospel of Sport—What Shall I Do to Be Saved? Play!
- No. 8. A Poet's Philosophy of Happiness—Omar Khayyam.
- No. 9-11. A Rationalist in Rome. In Three Parts.
- No. 12. Jew and Christian—According to Shakespeare.
- No. 13 and 14. Christian Science and Common Sense. Price 15c.
- No. 15. A Message from Abroad.
- No. 16. The First Modern Man.
- No. 17. The Monk and the Woman in the Garden of Allah.
- No. 18. The High Cost of Living and the Higher Cost of Superstition.
- No. 19. The Debate Between Three Clergymen and a Rationalist.
- No. 20. Rationalism and Crime.
- No. 21. Woman and Crime.
- No. 22. Was Jesus a Socialist?
- No. 23. The Catholic Church and the Socialist Party.
- No. 24. What Is the Trouble with the World?

VOLUME 2.

- No. 1. Who Made the Gods?
- No. 2. Marriage and Divorce, According to Rationalism.
- No. 3. The American Girl.
- No. 4. The Catholic Church in Politics.
- No. 5. Christian and Turk.
- No. 6. The Gospel According to Bernard Shaw.
- Nos. 7 and 8. Morality Without God. 15c.
- No. 9. A Letter to My Flock.
- No. 10. A Missionary Convert.
- No. 11. The Ex-Priest in Paris.
- Nos. 12 and 13. Joan of Arc.
- No. 14. Quo Vadis.
- No. 15. Damaged Goods.
- No. 16. Books and the Social Agitation.
- No. 17. The Jesuit and Their Morals.
- Nos. 18-20. How Freedom of Thought Was Born. In Three Parts.
- No. 21. What Is an Infidel?
- No. 22. Bryan's "Prince of Peace."
- No. 23. What Is an Educated Person?
- No. 24. The Religion of Herbert Spencer.

VOLUME 3.

- No. 1. The Religion of Goethe.
- No. 2. The Radical Woman.
- No. 3. Is the Morality of Jesus Sound?
- No. 4. The Montessori Method of Child-Training.
- No. 5. How the Bible Was Invented.
- No. 6. Mark Twain, the Laughing Philosopher.
- No. 7. The Great War.
- No. 8. What it Means to Be a Catholic.
- No. 9. Should America Prepare for War?
- No. 10. The Prohibition Movement.
- No. 11. What it Means to Be a Rationalist.
- No. 12. Is Christianity a Failure

Vol. I and II will be forwarded to any address for \$2.00 each; Vol. III for \$1.00

VOLUME 4.

- No. 1. The Martyrdom of Hypatia or the Death of the Classical World.
- No. 2. Jesus on the Stage.
- No. 3. Is Life Worth Living Without Immorality?

THE RATIONALIST, published monthly—price \$1.00. Kindly renew your subscription and send us new subscribers.

ORDER THROUGH THE
INDEPENDENT RELIGIOUS SOCIETY, 922 Lakeside Place, CHICAGO

THE RELIGION OF Washington, Jefferson and Franklin

What was the religion of these first great Americans?

There is only one answer to the question. It would be foolish as well as unfair to try to invent an answer. The men who made America have been dead for many years. But the country they helped to create still lives. Among the earliest Americans, the names of Washington, Paine, Franklin and Jefferson stand out like tall mountain peaks which are visible at any distance, and from every direction. These great names are known and revered in every home in the land. We are compelled to except from this statement the name of Thomas Paine, who has been feared and maligned for a hundred and more years by the orthodox mob. But Thomas Paine has not been without friends even among the clergy. "Paine," wrote the late Prof. David Swing, of Chicago, "was one of the best and grandest men that ever trod the planet." That is a splendid tribute, and it is splendidly deserved. "No man," wrote the Rev. Minot J. Savage, "rendered grander service to this country, and no man ought to be more cherished or remembered than Thomas Paine." Such generous appreciation makes us forget the carping criticisms of cowardice and hatred.

But however prejudiced the majority in America has been against the immortal author of *The Age of Reason*, and *The Rights of Man*, there has been but unanimous praise and affectionate gratitude for George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

The whole world may envy Washington for the growing esteem in which he is held. Ninety millions of people call him *father*. No higher praise could be uttered of a public man than to say that he was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." In the recent international gathering at The Hague, it is reported that the only political character of whose great

genius as a ruler and solid virtues as a man there was cordial and ardent unanimity ~~was~~ our own Washington.

The poet Byron hails him as the model soldier and statesman:

*Can tyrants by tyrants conquered be,
And Freedom find no champion and no child
Such as Columbia saw arise when she
Sprung forth a Pallas, arm'd and undefiled?*

Looking into the broad fields of history, he can scarcely find another Washington—

*Has earth no more
Such seeds within her breast, * * **

and he wonders if such unstained greatness is to be looked for only in virgin countries—

*Or must such minds be nourish'd in the wild,
Deep in the unpruned forest! Midst the roar
Of cataracts, where nursing nature smiled
On infant Washington?*

Compare this great Virginian with Cromwell, with Frederick of Prussia, with William of Orange, with Gustavus Adolphus, or with Cavour and Garibaldi, with Wellington, with Napoleon—and is he not the peer of them all, and *more?*

“If,” says a French historian of the first empire—“If Napoleon had in his veins one drop of the blood of a Washington, what a France there would have been!” It is one of the great scandals of history that the fate of Europe fell into the hands of a Bonaparte instead of a Washington. What made Washington a benediction was the felicitous balance of qualities, and the wonderful adaptation of the man to the exigency. He was as great as the ~~hour~~, and as sterling as the cause of the people. In the words of his own mother, “He did his duty as a man.” In the more representative words of President Garfield, “Eternity alone can reveal to the American people the obligation they are under to the immortal Washington.”

How very interesting as well as important then, it is, to know which religion supplied Washington with the inspiration that made him one of the glories of his age and country.

Benjamin Franklin's name is equally honored, the world over. He was the Socrates of America. He too was the *father* of his country—of intellectual America.

In Benjamin Franklin we have not only a great American, but also one of the really great men of his century. His thought was the first fruit to ripen on the tree planted in the soil of the new world. "You are the first philosopher, the first man of letters, for whom we are beholden to America," wrote Hume to Franklin. If we were to use a commercial phrase, we would say that few men have done more to advertise this country than Benjamin Franklin. He made America the vogue in the old country. He gave tone to our struggle for independence. Before his day Europe looked to this country for cereals, and minerals, for cotton and tobacco—for things, not men. But Benjamin Franklin gave to America an intellectual standing among the nations of the world. He was lionized in Europe. At the Academy of Immortals in Paris Voltaire embraced Franklin while the spectators cheered and wept for joy. In him they saw America stepping to the front.

There is no doubt of Franklin's high attainments, or of his multitudinous services to his country. His pen was pregnant. His written words were winged. His books were in every home, producing indelible impressions upon the national mind. At an earlier age of the world this *Titan*, who grasped the flying clouds with his hand and caught their fire, would have been worshipped as a god.

Is it not interesting then to know what so distinguished an American, with a massive brain, and a stalwart character, thought of religion? Was *he* a Christian?

Thomas Jefferson stands shoulder to shoulder with the mighty men of his age—the age of Voltaire, Rousseau, Condorcet, Franklin, Paine, Hume, Gibbon, Kant and Goethe. To this day, he is a democratic ideal. As a strong, straight, honest man, it is difficult to improve on him. But he was also a man of scholarly tastes. He lived, what we are pleased to call, the life of the mind. There is in his thought and speech a beautiful frankness which is so refreshing.

As the founder of the first secular university in all the world—that is to say, of the first institution of learning completely divorced from sectarianism and theology, Jefferson, too, may be called the father of his country—the father of the modern public school, which is the proudest

American institution. The University of Virginia was the child of his thought and love, and it in turn became the parent of education divorced from the supernatural.

It is with worthy pride that we think of these first class men. They made America a fatherland to us. Their example inspires patriotism in our breasts. We recall with enthusiasm the times upon which they shed the luster of their names. And more than our coal mines, and iron mines; more than our farm lands and forests—more than our millionaires of money, are we indebted for life and liberty to these millionaires of the mind,—these makers and builders of the nation, who though dead, can yet compel a hundred millions of people to turn their faces toward the same goal.

Such being the worth and the unstained fame of the first great group of Americans, whose power over us is increasing instead of diminishing, the question of their religious profession becomes of supreme interest to us their children. That they were great men; that they were good men; that they were the builders of the nation,—are facts of history. But what or which religion did they profess?

If it could be shown that they were consistent and conscientious believers in the creed of the churches, it would greatly honor that creed; if, on the other hand, it could be made clear that these master minds owe nothing to the church, or to its creed; that they did not believe in it; that they threw the magnificent weight of their greatness against it; that they plainly showed their disapproval of it,—hazardous though it was to do so,—that they professed a faith which was denounced as infidelity in their day,—that fact too would have an immense significance. We have, therefore, a subject of national importance—one of those subjects which decide questions and close controversies. What then, we ask again, was the religion of the first great Americans?

To begin with, can the question be answered? Have these men told us in honest words which religion they believed in? We can only present the evidence, and let the readers be the judges of its value and significance. All evidence, however, is not of equal effectiveness. Let me tell you something about the different kinds of evidence. There is evidence, for instance, that the first president went to the Episcopal church. There is evidence, also, that on

public occasions and in private correspondence Washington used certain religious phrases which, if we did not know better, could and would be interpreted as showing that he was a churchman. But there is evidence of a more direct and positive nature to the contrary. Let me explain the various kinds of evidence by an example: Could Victor-Hugo, for instance, speak the English language? Well, there are some English phrases in his many volumes; he was also known to have corresponded with Englishmen; he lived in England as an exile for many years; he spoke or understood nearly all the European and some oriental languages. From all this it is reasonable to infer that he possessed a knowledge of English. Yet this is only indirect evidence, and, therefore, not decisive. If, in one of his biographies, by any reliable author, we should come across a statement that the great poet was ignorant of the English language, all the indirect evidence to the contrary, as given above, falls to the ground. Stronger still than what we call direct evidence, as distinguished from indirect evidence, is positive or conclusive evidence. If, for instance, Victor Hugo himself, in one of his letters or writings, has stated, over his own signature, that he was not familiar with the English language, the question is closed,—it is settled forever. It is then the latter kind of evidence which is decisive. In this discussion we shall mainly confine ourselves to evidence of this nature. Where we have no positive evidence to produce we shall fall back upon direct evidence, and shall touch upon indirect evidence only to show that it is not safe to depend upon it.

There is still another consideration, which helps to add to the weight of the evidence produced. You all know, for instance, what an ardent admirer I am of Prof. Ernst Haeckel, the author of some of the greatest scientific works of the day. But what I might say in praise of his genius, of his courage, of his valuable services to progress, and of his unstinted devotion to liberty of thought, would not have the same force, and it will not carry the same weight, as the tribute to him by an orthodox believer. I may be prejudiced; I may find it to my interest to honor Haeckel; but any generous praise of Haeckel by one of his antagonists, that is to say, by one who would rather denounce him than praise him, would more positively prove Haeckel's worth and virtues.

If, therefore, we could produce clergymen, who naturally enough would prefer to prove that Washington, for example, was a Christian—to testify that he was not a Christian,—their testimony would be of the most conclusive kind of evidence we could present. It may help *my* cause to depict Washington as an unbeliever in **Christianity**; but when a clergyman admits that Washington was an unbeliever, he does so to the hurt of his cause, and against his own wishes, and, therefore, because of the overwhelming nature of the evidence proving Washington's non-Christian sympathies. And we have evidence of this decisive and conclusive character to offer in the discussion of our interesting subject.

The Episcopal church was one of the first churches to flourish in this country. Bishop White may well be called its founder in the colonies. In 1835, Col. Mercer, of Fredericksburg, mailed the following letter to Bishop White, from which we quote this sentence:

"I have a desire, my dear Sir, to know whether General Washington was a communicant of the Protestant Episcopal church, or whether he occasionally went to the communion only, or if he did so at all."

This is a straightforward question. The writer knows what he wants, and he also knows how to put his question so as to cover the entire field. An evasive reply is impossible to his query. Col. Mercer knows that in the Episcopal church, only communicants are Christians, that is to say, members in good and regular standing. If Washington was not a communicant at all, the fact has to be explained, and there is only one way of explaining it—he was not Christian enough to care to become a communicant. The colonel knows also that in appealing to Bishop White he has gone to the only authority, and the best in all the land. "No authority," he writes to the bishop, "can be so authentic and complete as yours on this point." Let us now read the bishop's reply:

"Dear Sir: In regard to the subject of your inquiry, truth requires me to say that General Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am the parochial minister.

Your humble servant,
William White."*

*Memoir of Bishop White, pp. 196-7.

That the bishop received many pressing inquiries on the same subject from many sources is shown by his own words: "I have been written to by many on that point, and have been obliged to answer them as I now do you."

We have, then, direct evidence that George Washington was not a professing Christian. He went to church with Mrs. Washington, but while the latter took the communion, her distinguished husband refrained from taking part in the ceremony. It appears that one of the clergymen whose church Washington frequented, complained that those who should know better, "whose age and position" made them leaders of the people,—left the church just before the communion service was announced. The president realized that he himself was the target for this public reproof, as he was one of those who, in the language of the minister, "turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord's Supper." He admitted to his friends that he deserved the rebuke, and promised not to give cause for a repetition of it. "He kept his word," writes a ministerial contributor to the *Episcopal Recorder*; "after that he never came to church with his wife on communion Sunday."

The anxious Christians of over a century ago were also bent upon knowing whether or not Washington took part in the *ordinary* services of the church. Did he read the prayer book? Did he kneel with the rest of the congregation? Let the same high authority answer these questions: "I never saw him in the said attitude (kneeling), although I was often in company with that great man, and had the honor of dining often at his table. I never heard anything from him which could manifest his opinions on the subject of religion."

The earnest churchmen were so sorry not to be able to claim Washington,—they felt so keenly the humiliation of not commanding the sympathy of a really great soul for their creed, that they wrote again and again, urging the bishop to please recall or reproduce some conversation with, or remark by, the president which could be cited as proving his faith in, or reverence for, the Christian religion. And this is the disconsolate answer they received from the bishop:—

"I do not believe that any degree of recollection will bring to my mind any fact which would prove General

Washington to have been a believer in the Christian religion."

Could there be any doubt now as to the religious sympathies of the first great American—the founder and father of our republic? In words quite as complete and conclusive, the Rev. Abercrombie describes Washington as a deist. Deism is a polite name for heresy. Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Spinoza were deists.* Another clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Wilson, told Robert Owen, who was then in this country, that he had read carefully every word that Washington ever wrote, without finding the least intimation anywhere, that he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. It did not seem possible to this clergyman, as it does not to us, that Washington could have been a Christian, as Mr. Bryan is one, for example, without letting the whole world know of it. In his fatherly letters to his adopted nephew, Washington touches upon a great variety of questions, but he never recommends the church, the Sabbath, the Bible, the Creed or the Christ, to him, or to any of his relatives. On the subject of the Christian religion he maintains a significant silence. No minister, writes Moncure D. Conway, was ever invited to pray with him or for him. At his table, no visiting clergyman was asked by Washington to say grace. He had a Bible in the White House, but it was as new after the death of Washington as it was at the time of its purchase. He had not, evidently, laid hands on it. He was equally indifferent to the Christian Sabbath. Its rigid, and we may say, stupid puritanism was offensive to him. He played and hunted and transacted business on that day. He did not mourn, whine, or worship on that day, aside from accompanying his wife to church.

Jefferson speaks of the great worry of the clergymen over Washington's refusal to declare himself a Christian. On one occasion a number of the leading clergy of the country called on the president, bent upon securing a confession of faith from him. "But," says Jefferson, "the old fox was too cunning for them."

In his *Seven Ages of Washington*, Mr. Owen Wister also writes of the frequent intrusions by clamorous clergymen upon the privacy of Washington's religious beliefs. But he made them feel, writes this interesting author, that they must mind their own business. He was not afraid to

*See the author's *A New Catechism*.

scandalize the pious by entertaining the infidel Volney at the White House, and by giving him a letter of recommendation to the American people. In his library he kept the works of Voltaire. He shocked the Christians again when he said that if men are good workmen, "they may be Jews or Christians, or they may be atheists." We have the further testimony of President Jefferson that Washington frequently opened his heart to Gouverneur Morris on the subject of religion. "General Washington believed no more in that system (Christianity) than I do," are the words quoted from Morris by Jefferson. To this should be added the words of Adams, written to Jefferson: "The president of the United States has been calumniated for his liberal sentiments by men who have attributed that liberality to a latent design to promote the cause of infidelity."

Nor could the pious preachers of the creed that failed to command the enthusiasm of a generous nature, make a "death-bed scene" out of Washington's last hours. He passed away as serenely as the sun after a long shining. "I am not afraid to go," he said, as he felt the stars coming out in the firmament deserted by the sinking sun. He felt for his pulse, which beat his last march—the march to the dreamless sleep in the bosom of Mother Earth. No fear of hell, or hope of golden streets disturbed the equanimity of his lofty mind. He had lived a soldier, he died a soldier.

And today, over his own signature, one of the proudest in all the world, are written these words—words which have helped to keep America free from cruel religious persecutions, or the creed-craze, which has played havoc with older countries—

*The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.**

We have refrained from touching upon any indirect and inferential evidence, and have confined ourselves to such evidence as would be considered final by all fair minded people. Neither are we going to discuss the many pious fabrications about Washington, as, for instance, the cherry tree, and the Valley Forge episode. Unfortunately, the earliest biographers of the hero of the American Revolution were churchmen, who wrote for the church-going public. It is natural, therefore, to find in these biographies considerable about Washington that is apocryphal. The

*From Washington's Message to Congress.

same motives which inspired orthodox writers to denounce Paine, inspired them to claim Washington, and to invent evidence to justify that claim. But the page of history is open; it lies before us, and in it there is the most conclusive proof that George Washington, known and honored by all the world, and loved by all his countrymen, agreed with the leading philosophers, scientists, poets, and reformers of the world, in rejecting the Christian superstition, imported to this country from Asia—an alien faith, hostile to liberty, to progress, to prosperity, and seeking to sacrifice the rights of man to the glory of God! For our free institutions we are indebted to Americans who had the courage to contradict the creeds.

What have the American churches to say against the argument we have presented? Why was not Washington a Christian? Is it possible for a man to be good and great without professing Christianity? Washington's life answers *that* question in the affirmative. If your mother's religion is good enough for you, the religion of the noblest, bravest, purest father a nation ever had—the religion of honest thought and conscientious endeavor is good enough for us.

In trying to acquaint ourselves with the religious beliefs of Benjamin Franklin we do not meet with such difficulties as now and then hamper the student in his investigations relating to Washington's religion. The latter, as the president of the people, occupied a more delicate position, and was compelled to speak and act with great caution, which was quite becoming to a man of his responsibilities. He realized that he was the chief magistrate of a country in which the majority were Christians; he felt also that he must, as a political character, keep aloof from religious partisanship—a splendid policy for the head of a secular republic.

But Franklin, after all, was a private citizen, and could afford to express himself with less reserve on the eternally interesting subject of religion. Like all the boys of his day, Franklin went to school to the clergyman. Indeed, the whole world at one time was the clergyman's pupil. If the world today is not what the clergyman wanted it to be, whose fault is it? In his *Autobiography*, Franklin writes: "My parents had given me betimes religious impressions, and I received from my infancy a pious education in the principles of Calvinism." Yes, unfortunately,

Calvinism was the stone which, as if it were bread, was fed to the children of the land. Even the Quakers were overawed by the hard and fast dogmas of Calvinism—one of the most blighting systems of thought ever imported to this free land. How could a young boy defend himself against this desperate theology? But Franklin was not an ordinary boy. He had weapons even at an early age against **this monster**: “**But scarcely was I arrived at fifteen years of age, when, after having doubted in turn of different tenets, according as I found them combated in the different books that I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself.**”*

This is full of meaning. What shall we think of a religion that can not hold even an inquiring mind at the tender age of fifteen? Think of all the resources of the church—the school, the press, the home—and yet, and yet,—even a boy of fifteen rips open its cloak of pretense and artifice from top to bottom! What is there in this religion that revolts the awakened intelligence of even a boy in his *'teens*? Let the clergy answer.

The tutors of Franklin made one mistake,—they allowed him, or at least they failed to prevent him from reading other books beside the Bible. Ah, the Jesuits are wiser. Franklin stole time from attending church to read Plutarch: “The time which I devoted to reading, was the evening after my day’s labor was finished, the morning before it began, and Sundays, when I could escape divine service.” That is pathetic,—*when I could escape divine service*. Poor lad, it was not often he could escape “divine service.” Here was a mind worth keeping in the faith, but as it seems to be the rule, whenever there is a mind worth keeping, the church loses it—and loses it early. Is it any wonder that a boy or a young man who preferred pagan literature to the Jewish-Christian Bible was feared and hated? “I began to be regarded, by pious souls, with horror, either as an apostate or an atheist,” writes the truth-seeking Franklin in his *Autobiography*. In Boston he narrowly escaped the wrath of a church tribunal for his “cursed libels.” The periodical he is interested in, and to which he is the chief contributor, must henceforth be submitted to a censor before it is printed. It is not argument against argument, honest thought against honest thought, but intimidation and force against free inquiry

**Autobiography*, p. 66.

and the liberty of expression. How did young Franklin try to meet the position of the clergy? By pen and type. How did the Boston clergy try to answer Franklin? By *force*. But Franklin's pen conquered.

In a letter to the world-famed George Whitefield, the revivalist, who was moving both England and America with his sermons, Franklin sent the following letter: "The faith you mention has doubtless its use in the world. I do not desire to see it diminished, nor would I desire to lessen it in any way; but I wish it were more productive of good works than I have generally seen it. I mean real good works, works of kindness, charity, mercy, and public spirit, not holy day keeping, sermon reading, and performing church ceremonies, or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments, *despised even by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity.*"*

But it is in his letter to his sister, "My dear beloved Jenny," that he appears less reticent, and becomes bolder in disclosing his intimate thoughts: "It is a pity that good works among some sorts of people are so little valued. These they almost put out of countenance by calling morality, rotten morality, . . . righteousness, filthy rags, and when you mention virtue, pucker up their noses, at the same time that they eagerly sniff up an empty, canting harangue, as if it were a posy of the choicest flowers." He gives also a truthful picture of the ambitious parson seeking to dominate the thoughts of man in the name of a silent God. "Nowadays we have scarcely a little parson that does not think it the duty of every man within his reach to sit under his petty ministrations, and that whoever omits this offends God."

Benjamin Franklin learned to reject completely the Calvinism that had stung his youthful mind. Eternal punishment seemed to him worse than any earthly plague or tyranny. Eternal bliss was an equally hurtful falsehood to him. "For my part," he writes, "I have not the vanity to think I deserve it, the folly to expect it, or the ambition to desire it." No church-made man would or could write so sanely. He said that "Multitudes of the zealously orthodox of different sects who, on the last day, may flock together in hopes of seeing each other damned, will be disappointed. . . ." Think of a religion which holds up such an expectation as a part of one's future happiness!

*Italics ours.

There is the serpent's sting somewhere in such a faith. How glorious is science, which has extracted this fear from our thoughts and thereby sweetened our lives!

There is no end to quoting from Franklin. "When a religion is good," he writes to a clergyman, "I conceive that it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one." These are splendid words for our "church and state advocates" to ponder. The intolerant and exclusive spirit of religion also provoked his displeasure: "Most sects in religion think themselves in possession of all truth, and whenever others differ from them, it is so far error." He expresses the difference between the Catholics and the Protestants by saying that the former claim to be infallible, the latter claim to be *never in the wrong*. All sects, in their day of prestige and power, have persecuted their fellows. The Catholics complained of the pagan persecutions, but practiced it on the Protestants; the Protestants complained of the Catholic persecutions, but practiced it upon the Puritans. These again complained of the bishop's persecution and practiced it upon the Quakers and Independents. Persecution is as natural to the sects, according to Franklin, as water is to the fish. Science and the state combined can barely maintain the peace against religion.

Referring to an invitation he had extended to a clergyman to be his guest, and to the latter's reply that he hoped the hospitality had been extended to him "for Christ's sake," who would surely reward him for it, Franklin remarks that it was not for "Christ's sake" that he offered to show the courtesies of hospitality to a stranger in the country, but for humanity's sake.

And what a great tribute is there to the makers of thought in the following lines: "All the heretics I have known have been virtuous men. They have the virtue of fortitude, or they could not venture to own their heresy; and they cannot afford to be deficient in any of the other virtues, as that would give advantage to their many enemies; and they have not, like the orthodox, such a number of friends to excuse or justify them. . . . It is not to my good friend's heresy, that I attribute his honesty. On the

contrary, 'tis his honesty that brought upon him the character of a heretic."* These gracious and brave words should be committed to memory.

Franklin, the great thinker and reformer and builder of this nation, was no more a Christian than Washington. The Asiatic superstition, with its miracles, myths, fables and dogmas, had no message for his free mind.

Yet, Franklin was not irreligious. He believed in the service of man, and in the quest for knowledge. Like Paine and Voltaire, he was a deist, believing in a Supreme Being and in a future existence. These two beliefs are common to all the religions of the world, and to some philosophers, and are, therefore, not the monopoly of any creed. Like Thomas Paine, Franklin said, "I believe in one God, and hope for a future life." Since the days of these great Americans, science has thrown additional light upon even these two tenets of ancient man. But our purpose is not to discuss the truth of these doctrines, but to report the beliefs of the fathers of this country. We believe Franklin himself has answered the question whether or not he was a Christian. But let us quote in conclusion from the men who have carefully read all his writings. Theodore Parker writes: "It would be an insult to say that he believed in the popular theology of his time, or of ours, for I find not a line from his pen indicating such a belief." And this from the Rev. Dr. Priestly, a contemporary of Franklin: "It is much to be lamented that a man of Franklin's general good character and influence should have been an unbeliever in Christianity, and also have done as much as he did to make others unbelievers."†

We ask again, why was not Benjamin Franklin, the first illustrious thinker America produced, a Christian?

In his extended correspondence with John Adams, as well as in his writings on a long list of subjects, Jefferson has expressed his mind unmistakably on the question of religion. He is very much more outspoken than Washington, and more aggressive than Franklin. When Jefferson's works first appeared in print, the Christian clergy were greatly chagrined, and did not fail to express their horror. *The New York Observer*, a Presbyterian publication, remarked that Jefferson was more than an unbe-

*Works, Vol. X., 365. Quoted by Remsburg. Six Great Americans.

†Priestly's Autobiography. Quoted by Remsburg.

liever,—he was also a “scoffer.” That word has **done** real service to the clergy—it relieves them of the **necessity** of trying to refute the arguments of an **opponent**.

It is also related that certain **religious** papers appeared in mourning on the day Jefferson **entered** the White House as the third president of the **United** States. They remembered that he had said, “In **every** age, and in every country, the priest has been **hostile** to liberty; he is always in alliance with the **despot**.” The priest can not stand alone, because he has **nothing** but oriental fables to stand upon, and hence, when **attacked** by science, by modern culture, and by the **brave** thoughts of honest men, he must appeal to the state **for** protection. Has science ever invoked the protection of the sword? Why has the church?

And see how much, according to President Jefferson, the **state** has done for the priest. “We have most unwisely **committed** to the preachers of our particular superstition **the** direction of public opinion. . . . We have given them stated and privileged days to collect and catechise us.” He hoped America would disown the priest, Protestant as well as Catholic, whose presence in any country has, alas, been a menace to its peace and prosperity. To John Adams, he writes: “I join you, therefore, in sincere congratulations that this den of the priesthood is at length broken up, and that a Protestant popedom is no longer to disgrace American history and character.” Jefferson traced all the misery in the political and social world to “kings, nobles and priests.” Of course, among the clergy, there were those who were worse than their fellows. “The Presbyterian clergy,” he writes, “are the most intolerant of all sects. . . . Ready at the word of the lawgiver, if such a word could now be obtained, to put their torch to the pile.” Referring to the blasphemy laws, by the help of which the agents of superstition endeavored to prolong their rule, or rather to postpone their downfall, Jefferson calls attention to the “slavery under which a people have been willing to remain” for centuries. And it seemed curious to him, as it must to us, that the Americans, who had achieved political emancipation, should continue to keep their necks in the yoke of religious bondage. It only proves that not until man is free from the priest, is he really and completely emancipated. On the contrary, let the priest remain master, and he will surely bring back all the

old tyrants. Rid a people of divine slavery first, and there will be no chance for any human slavery.

Like Washington, Jefferson did not care what god or to how many his neighbor prayed, so long as he behaved himself. After all, the deed, not the creed, is the test. The creed is the plaything; life is the reality. The creed is meant to wrangle over; it is conduct that sweeps the whole gamut of life. Hence, it is no wonder that when John Adams, also one of our early presidents, wrote to Jefferson: "This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it," he received for reply the following: "If by religion, we are to understand dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation is just."

Writing to one of his relatives, about to enter active life, Jefferson gives such advice as would cause a preacher to turn pale. "Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there is one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear." Is there a preacher that could speak or write like that. "If," continues Jefferson, "If it (your questionings) end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and in the love of others which it will procure for you." Needless to add, that the author of the above counsel to a young man had a mind untainted by superstition. His rejection of superstition was based upon knowledge of its origin and scope. "I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world," he writes, "and do not find *in our particular superstition* one redeeming feature. They are all founded on fables and mythologies."*

When Jefferson is thus freely expressing himself in favor of the unfettered thought of the mind as against slave thought, he feels that he is provoking the opposition of the church. "I know," he exclaims, "I know my conduct will give offense to the clergy, but the advocate of religious freedom is to expect neither peace nor forgiveness from them." There is a touch of sadness in these words. He realizes how powerful is the enemy and how difficult to dislodge him. He knows that it is in vain that he tells them: "Truth can stand by itself, it is error alone that needs the support of government;" in vain also that he points out to them that, had the ancient Romans forbidden

*Italics ours.

freedom of thought as the modern Christians are doing, there would have been no Christianity in the world today; in vain also that he pleads with them to remember that governments have "nothing to do with opinion, and that compulsion makes hypocrites, not converts," because what is the use of trying to reason with people who fear and hate reason. Jefferson was confident that the child he had adopted, and which he loved best—the University of Virginia, had no more determined enemies than "the priests of the different religious sects, to whose spell on the human mind its improvement is ominous."

Jefferson had also the courage to appreciate Thomas Paine, even when the church was waging a relentless war against this bringer of the Promethean fire to his countrymen. When Voltaire's name was coupled with that of Beelzebub in every Christian land, Jefferson placed his bust upon his library table. When asked for his opinion of these two great infidels of the age, Jefferson replied: "They were alike in making bitter enemies of the priests and the Pharisees of their day. But they were honest men; both advocates of human liberty."†

Compare Jefferson, the founder of the University of Virginia and the first American patron of education along secular lines, with that governor of Virginia, who, steeped in puritanic bigotry, exclaimed: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing in the state. God keep us from both."‡

Jefferson called himself a materialist. He used the word in its philosophical sense. Matter was to him the basis of everything, and also of every thought. All our ideas, he argued, came to us through the avenue of the senses. Where there is no matter, there is neither thought nor life. Even as motion is a property of bodies, so is thought a secretion of matter. If the eyes could not see; if the ears could not hear, there would be no mind. "When once we quit the basis of sensation," he writes to his great friend, John Adams, "all is in the wind." He also argued that, to talk of the immaterial is to talk of nothing. To call God spirit, was tantamount to a confession of ignorance. To say the soul is not material, was to say the soul is nothing. There is no getting away from Jefferson's irresistible logic.

†*Letters of Jefferson.*

‡*Governor Wm. Berkeley, 1670. Quoted by Moncure D. Conway.*

We can not imagine an immaterial existence of any kind. All our conceptions take form and become incarnate in a body.

A short time ago a Chicago preacher was reported as having said that no unbeliever in the Christian religion had ever occupied the presidential chair or ever would. But if the quotations we have produced are not fabrications, then it must be admitted that the first great American, the first to rule America, the first to be called president—the great Washington, the Father of his Country, as also Franklin and Jefferson, were disbelievers in the Jewish-Christian religion.

If it is true that only the ignorant and the wicked reject the Christian religion, how are we going to account for the unbelief of the noblest and wisest men this country has produced? Indeed, they were unbelievers because they were brave and noble. When it was to their advantage to bend the knee to the idols of the multitude, they did not hesitate to prefer their own self-respect to the praise of man or the rewards of Heaven.

