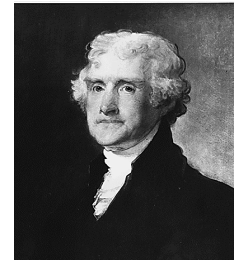


From the Correspondence of  
**JOHN ADAMS &  
THOMAS JEFFERSON**  
on Life, Religion, and the Young Republic



from Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1959).  
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**John Adams** b. 1735, president 1797-1801, d. July 4, 1826 at age 90

**Thomas Jefferson** b. 1743, president 1801-1809, d. July 4, 1826 at age 83

In the time of this correspondence, Adams was 77 to 89 years old, writing from Quincy, Massachusetts, and Jefferson was 69 to 81 years old, writing from Monticello in western Virginia.

## 1812, January 21: Jefferson to Adams \_\_\_\_\_

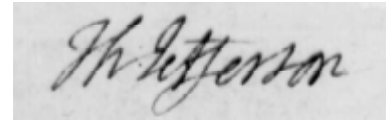
A letter from you calls up recollections very dear to my mind. It carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow laborers in the same cause, struggling for what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government. Laboring always at the same oar, with some wave ever ahead threatening to overwhelm us and yet passing harmless under our bark, we knew not how, we rode through the storm with heart and hand, and made a happy port. . . .

But whither is senile garrulity leading me? Into politics, of which I have taken final leave. I think little of them, and say less. I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier. Sometimes indeed I look back to former occurrences, in remembrance of our old friends and fellow laborers, who have fallen before us. Of the signers of the Declaration of Independence I see now living not more than half a dozen on your side of the Potomak, and, on this side, myself alone.<sup>1</sup> You and I have been wonderfully spared, and myself with remarkable health, and a considerable activity of body and mind. I am on horseback 3. or 4. hours of

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<sup>1</sup> Ten signers of the Declaration, including JA and TJ, were alive in 1812: Elbridge Gerry (*d.* 1814) and Robert Treat Paine (*d.* 1814) of Massachusetts, William Ellery (*d.* 1820) of Rhode Island, William Floyd (*d.* 1821) of New York, Benjamin Rush (*d.* 1813) and George Clymer (*d.* 1813) of Pennsylvania, Thomas McKean (*d.* 1817) of Delaware, and Charles Carroll (*d.* 1832) of Maryland. [Section 8, footnote #38 in Cappon] NHC Note: Thomas McKean named here was one of the judges in the trial of the Indian chief Mamachtage, related by Hugh Henry Brackenridge in *Incidents of the Insurrection*, 1785.

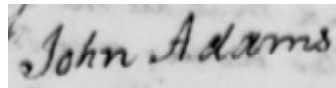
every day; visit 3. or 4. times a year a possession I have 90 miles distant,<sup>2</sup> performing the winter journey on horseback. I walk little however; a single mile being too much for me; and I live in the midst of my grandchildren, one of whom has lately promoted me to be a great grandfather.<sup>3</sup>



### 1812, February 3: Adams to Jefferson \_\_\_\_\_

Your Memoranda of the past, your Sense of the present and Prospect for the Future seem to be well founded, as far as I see. But the Latter i.e. the Prospect of the Future, will depend on the Union: and how is that Union to be preserved? Concordia Res parvae crescunt, Discordia Maxima dilabuntur. . . .<sup>4</sup> The Union is still to me an Object of as much Anxiety as ever Independence was. To this I have sacrificed my Popularity in New England and yet what Treatment do I still receive from the Randolphs and Sheffeyes of Virginia. By the Way are not these Eastern Shore Men? My Senectutal Loquacity has more than retaliated your “Senile Garrulity. . . .”

I walk every fair day, sometimes 3 or 4 miles. Ride now and then but very rarely more than ten or fifteen Miles. . . . I have the Start of you in Age by at least ten Years: but you are advanced to the Rank of a Great Grandfather before me.



### 1813, June 28: Adams to Jefferson \_\_\_\_\_

The *general Principles*, on which the Fathers Atchieved Independence, were the only Principles in which that beautiful Assembly of young Gentlemen could Unite . . . . And what were these *general Principles*? I answer, the general Principles of Christianity, in which all those Sects were United: And the *general Principles* of English and American Liberty, in which all those young Men United, and which had United all Parties in America, in Majorities sufficient to assert and maintain her Independence.

Now I will avow, that I then believed, and now believe, that those general Principles of Christianity, are as eternal and immutable, as the Existence and Attributes of God; and that those Principles of Liberty, are as unalterable as human Nature and our terrestrial, mundane System. I could therefore safely say,

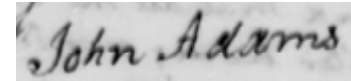
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<sup>2</sup> Poplar Forest, in Bedford County, Va., which TJ acquired in 1774 from his father-in-law’s estate. He built an octagon house there while he was president. Malone, *Jefferson*, I, 441-42; Paul Wiltach, *Jefferson and Monticello* (N.Y., 1925), 159-60. [Section 8, footnote #39 in Cappon]

<sup>3</sup> TJ’s first great-grandchild was John Warner Bankhead (b. 1810), eldest child of Charles Lewis Bankhead and Mrs. Anne Cary Randolph Bankhead, first-born of Thomas Mann Randolph and Mrs. Martha Jefferson Randolph. Walter L. Zorn, *The Descendants of the Presidents of the United States* (2d rev. edn.; Monroe, Mich., 1955), 32. [Section 8, footnote #40 in Cappon]

<sup>4</sup> “Small communities grow great through harmony, great ones fall to pieces through discord.” Sallust, [*The War with Jugurtha*, X [1<sup>st</sup> C. B.C.] [Section 9, footnote #44 in Cappon]

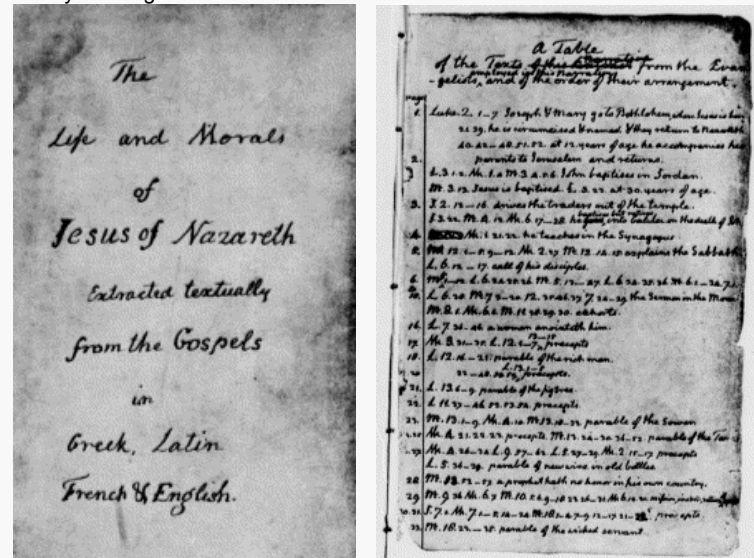
consistently with all my then and present Information, that I believed they would never make Discoveries in contradiction to these *general Principles*. In favour of these *general Principles* in Phylosophy, Religion and Government, I could fill Sheets of quotations from Frederick of Prussia, from Hume, Gibbon, Bolingbroke, Reausseau and Voltaire, as well as Neuton and Locke: not to mention thousands of Divines and Philosophers of inferiour Fame.



## 1813, October 12: Jefferson to Adams

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, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to them. . . . We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologisms<sup>5</sup> into which they

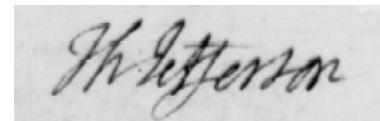
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Pages from Jefferson's Bible, ca. 1804: "by cutting out verse by verse"

have been led by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse

out of the printed book, and arranging, the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an 8vo. [octavo] of 46. pages of pure and unsophisticated doctrines,<sup>6</sup> such as were professed and acted on by the *unlettered* apostles, the Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1st. century.

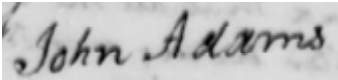


<sup>5</sup> Amphibologisms: statements worded in such a way as to render their meaning ambiguous. [NHC note]

<sup>6</sup> The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth (text in Randall, *Jefferson*, III, 654-55, which TJ was planning as early as 1804; see TJ to Priestley, Jan. 29, 1804, Ford, VIII, 294, and Rush to TJ, Aug. 29, 1804, Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Rush*, II, 886. In 1819 or later TJ prepared the more elaborate *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin French and English*. See Introduction by Cyrus Adler to facsimile edn. [Washington, 1904], 12-18.[Section 10, footnote #71 in Cappon] NHC note: See *The Jefferson Bible* online at <http://www.angelfire.com/co/JeffersonBible>.

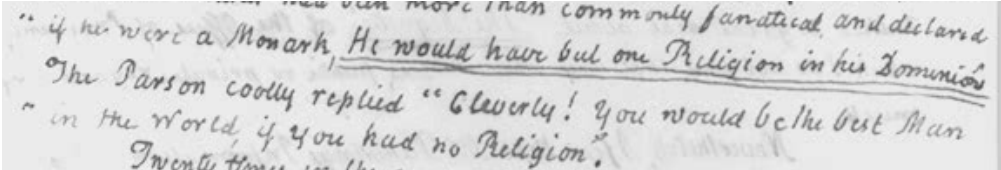
**1815, June 20: Adams to Jefferson** \_\_\_\_\_

The question before the human race is, Whether the God of nature shall govern the World by his own laws, or Whether Priests and Kings shall rule it by fictitious Miracles? Or, in other Words, whether Authority is originally in the People? or whether it has descended for 1800 years in a succession of Popes and Bishops, or brought down from Heaven by the holy Ghost in the form of a Dove, in a Phyal of holy Oil?



**1817, April 19: Adams to Jefferson** \_\_\_\_\_

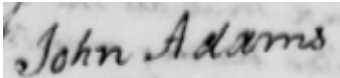
At that Period [when Adams was 12 years old] Lemuel Bryant was my Parish Priest; and Joseph Cleverly my Latin School Master. Lemuel was a jolly jocular and liberal Schollar and Divine. Joseph a Scollar and Gentleman; but a biggoted episcopalian of the School of Bishop Saunders and Dr. Hicks, a down right conscientious passive Obedience Man in Church and State. The Parson and the Pedagogue lived much together, but were eternally disputing about Government and Religion. One day, when the Schoolmaster had been more than commonly fanatical, and declared “if he were a Monark, He would have but one Religion in his Dominions” The Parson coolly replied “Cleverly! You would be the best Man in the World, if You had no Religion.”



Twenty times, in the course of my late

Reading, have I been upon the point of breaking out, “This would be the best of all possible Worlds, if there were no Religion in it.” !!! But in this exclamati[on] I should have been as fanatical as Bryant or Cleverly. Without Religion this World would be Something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company, I mean Hell. So far from believing in the total and universal depravity of human Nature; I believe there is no Individual totally depraved. The most abandoned Scoundrel that ever existed, never Yet Wholly extinguished his Conscience, and while Conscience remains there is some Religion. . . .

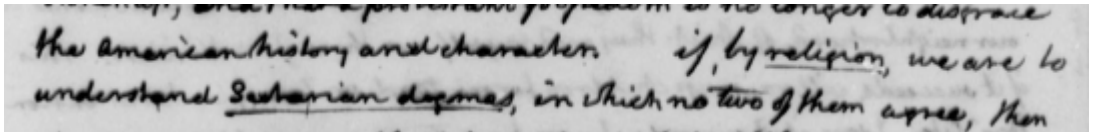
How it is possible than [i.e., that] Mankind should submit to be governed as they have been is to me an inscrutable Mystery. How they could bear to be taxed to build the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Pyramyds of Egypt, Saint Peters at Rome, Notre Dame at Paris, St. Pauls in London, with a million Etceteras; when my Navy Yards, and my quasi Army made such a popular Clamour, I know not.



### 1817, May 5: Jefferson to Adams\_\_\_\_\_

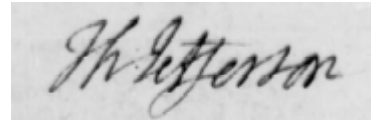
If, by *religion*, we are to understand *Sectarian dogmas*, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on that hypothesis is just, ‘that this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it.’

But if the moral precepts, innate



the American history and character if, by religion, we are to understand Sectarian dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then

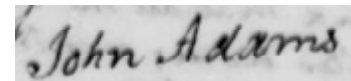
in man, and made a part of his physical constitution, as necessary for a social being, if the sublime doctrines of philanthropism, and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth in which all agree, constitute true religion, then, without it, this would be, as you again say, ‘something not fit to be named, even indeed a Hell.’



Th. Jefferson

### 1818, December 8: Adams to Jefferson\_\_\_\_\_

I believe in God and in his Wisdom and Benevolence: and I cannot conceive that such a Being could make such a Species as the human merely to live and die on this Earth. If I did not believe a future State I should believe in no God. This Un[i]verse; this all; this  $\tau\omicron\ \pi\alpha\upsilon$  [“totality”]; would appear with all its swelling Pomp, a boyish Fire Work.

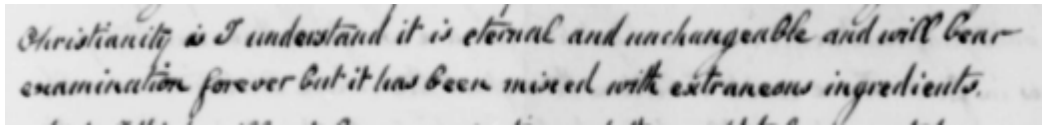


John Adams

### 1825, January 23: Adams to Jefferson\_\_\_\_\_

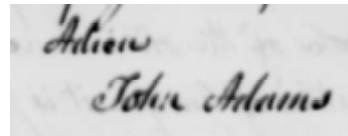
We think ourselves possessed or at least we boast that we are so of Liberty of conscience on all subjects and of the right of free inquiry and private judgment, in all cases and yet how far are we from these exalted privileges in fact. There exists I believe throughout the whole Christian world a law which makes it blasphemy to deny or to doubt the divine inspiration of all the books of the old and new Testaments from Genesis to Revelations. In most countries of Europe it is punished by fire at the stake, or the rack or the wheel: in England itself it is punished by boring through the tongue with a red hot poker: in America it is not much better, even in our Massachusetts which I believe upon the whole is as temperate and moderate in religious zeal as most of the States. A law was made in the latter end of the last century repealing the cruel punishments of the former laws but substituting fine and imprisonment upon all those blasphemers upon any book of the old Testament or new. Now what free inquiry when a writer must surely encounter the risk of fine or imprisonment for adducing any argument for investigation into the divine authority of those books? Who would run the risk of translating Volney’s

Recherches Nouvelles? who would run the risk of translating Dupuis?<sup>7</sup> but I cannot enlarge upon this subject, though I have it much at heart. I think such laws a great embarrassment, great obstructions to the improvement of the human mind. Books that cannot bear examination certainly ought not to be



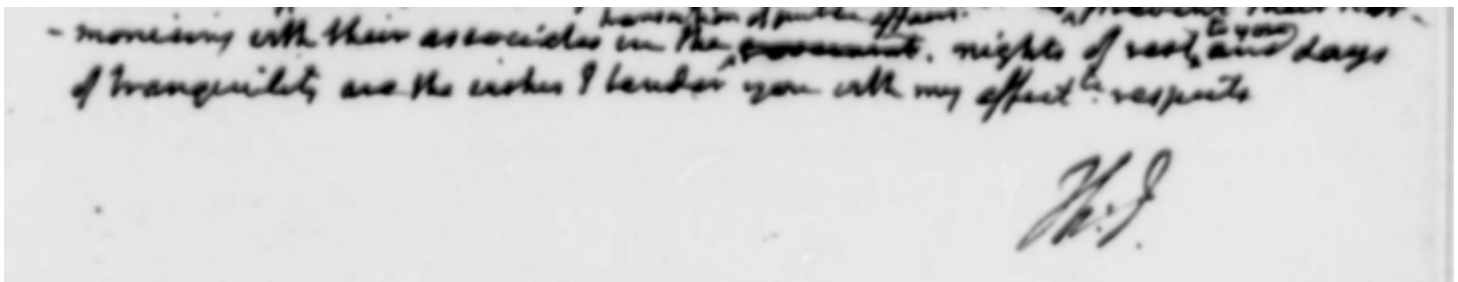
established as divine inspiration by penal laws. . . . The

substance and essence of Christianity as I understand it is eternal and unchangeable and will bear examination forever but it has been mixed with extraneous ingredients, which I think will not bear examination and they ought to be separated.



### 1825, February 15: Jefferson to Adams \_\_\_\_\_

I sincerely congratulate you on the high gratific[atio]n which the issue of the late election must have afforded you. . . .<sup>8</sup> So deeply are the principles of order, and of obedience to law impressed on the minds of our citizens generally that I am persuaded there will be as immediate an acquiescence in the will of the majority as if Mr. Adams had been the choice of every man. . . . Nights of rest to you and days of tranquility are the wishes I tender you with my affect[iona]te respects



Nights of rest to you and days of tranquility are the wishes I tender you with my affect<sup>te</sup> respects

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<sup>7</sup> Constantin-François Volney and Charles François Dupuis: French philosophers of the school that challenged the historicity of Jesus and the validity of Christian scripture, ascribing their origins to ancient myths. [NHC note]

<sup>8</sup> "late election": election of John Quincy Adams as president. [NHC note]