

The Possibility of the Impossible: Miracles, Wonder, and Thomas Jefferson's Razor

"Miracles do not happen in contradiction to nature, but only in contradiction to that which is known to us in nature."

—St. Augustine¹
Fourth century AD

Many people throughout history have protested religious beliefs through speeches, pamphlets, books, and public demonstrations, but seldom have they dissented with the tool President Thomas Jefferson used: his razor. Most men take their razor to their beards; Jefferson applied his to his Bible. Among the passages he slashed were those dealing with miracles.

Jefferson was raised an Anglican, and over the years he maintained some degree of affiliation with the Anglican Church. During his student years at the College of William and Mary, he read the works of the Scottish moral philosophers such as David Hume, who paved the way for his critical views of religious institutions and beliefs. But the most decisive influence on his religious outlook was Joseph Priestly, the English scientist who is usually credited with the discovery of oxygen in 1774.

Priestly was a learned man of wide interests; he published 150 works in theology, natural philosophy, education, and political theory. His 1782 book *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* had a profound impact on Jefferson.² According to Priestly, the human character and teachings of Jesus had been distorted and obscured in the centuries following his death. Doctrines had been invented that were wholly foreign to Jesus'

teachings. Jefferson, following Priestly, believed it possible to purge his teachings of what he considered to be doctrinal absurdities. Jefferson was witheringly scornful of what he called "priestcraft," whose practitioners, he believed, had perpetrated rank superstitions on the faithful for centuries to maintain their status and power. Jefferson was convinced that Jesus' moral teachings were totally compatible with natural law as revealed by the sciences, and that they had been diluted by contrived doctrines such as the Trinity and by fabrications such as miracles.

Jefferson was a true son of the Enlightenment, the European movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized reason and individualism rather than tradition. He believed that morality flows not from revelation, as maintained by many religions, but from an innate moral sense. Thus he was inclined to reject any authority that could not be justified by reason.

Jefferson regarded Jesus' ethical teachings as impeccable. In an 1803 letter to Benjamin Rush, a member of the Universalist movement and America's most famous physician, he wrote, "I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other."³

So, out came the razor. "Of immense appeal is the image of President Jefferson, up late at night in his study at the White House, using a razor to cut out large seg-

ments of the four Gospels and pasting the parts he decided to keep onto the pages of a blank book, purchased to receive them," says theologian Thom Belote.³

Jefferson's initial effort took place in 1804. He excised all accounts of miracles, the virgin birth, all claims to Jesus' divinity and the resurrection, as well as all references to angels, genealogy, and prophecy. He mingled selected verses from the four Gospels in chronological order to create a single narrative. He called the result *The Philosophy of Jesus*. Some scholars believe he intended this bowdlerized version of the Gospels only for his personal devotional use. But in later years he greatly revised and expanded this project. The final product, finished in 1820, he called *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, now commonly referred to as the Jefferson Bible.⁴

Jefferson wanted to restore clarity to what he considered the impossibly muddled story of Jesus that has come down to us. The errors had crept in, he believed, because the early Christians, overly eager to make their religion appealing to pagans, had inserted the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the teachings of Plato, obscuring Jesus' original message. But Jesus' real words were still there. Jefferson's goal, as he explained in an 1813 letter to John Adams, was one of "abstracting what is really his from the rubbish in which it is buried, easily distinguished by its luster from the dross of his biographers, and as separate from that as the diamond from the dung hill."⁵ If this task were done correctly, Jefferson predicted that, "There will be found

remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man . . . of pure and unsophisticated doctrines.”⁶

Those who believed in the inerrancy of the Bible were horrified by Jefferson’s actions and considered them sacrilegious. Jefferson was unmoved by these objections. He considered his revisions an act of devotion and love toward a man he believed to be the greatest moral teacher who ever lived.

In her account of Jefferson and his Bible, filmmaker Marilyn Mellowes says, “Jefferson discovered a Jesus who was a great Teacher of Common Sense. His message was the morality of absolute love and service. Its authenticity was not dependent upon the dogma of the Trinity or even the claim that Jesus was uniquely inspired by god . . . In short, Mr. Jefferson’s Jesus, modeled on the ideals of the Enlightenment thinkers of his day, bore a striking resemblance to Jefferson himself.”⁵

Although he completed the Life and Morals project in 1820 and shared it with a number of friends, he never permitted it to be published during his lifetime. Thomas Jefferson Randolph, his grandson, inherited the book following Jefferson’s death in 1826. The National Museum in Washington published it in 1895. It was later published as a lithographic reproduction by an act of Congress, and for many years copies were presented to new members of Congress.⁷ *The Jefferson Bible* is now in the public domain and is freely available on many Internet sites, as well as through several commercial publishers.

Currently, religious fundamentalists often view Jefferson through a dirty lens. As Belote says, “Today religious conservatives portray Jefferson as a sympathetic figure, unaware of his religious beliefs, his understanding of religious freedom or his criticisms of evangelical religiosity.”³ In Jefferson’s day, however, Protestant fundamentalists were well aware of his “deistical” beliefs and tried to make them a factor in elections. Jefferson never responded publicly to any of these attacks, nor did he make any public statement concerning his faith.^{3,8}

Why did Jefferson find miracles so vexing? He was born in 1743, when the Enlightenment was in full force. Newtonian science was considered the criterion by

which true knowledge was to be measured. Even in human affairs, scholars sought to find natural laws similar to those scientists had discovered that governed the physical universe. The goal of inquiring minds was to understand the natural world and humankind’s place in it solely through reason, without turning to religion. And everyone agreed that Jefferson possessed one of the most inquiring minds of his day.

He was not alone, of course. Scholars have argued that many of the signatories of America’s Declaration of Independence, of which Jefferson was the primary author, were motivated by Enlightenment principles. This led to a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals—including, in Jefferson’s case, traditional religious structures and beliefs. For centuries, the major religions had seemingly defied reason by proclaiming the centrality of revelation and faith. For someone as reason prone as Jefferson, this was intolerable. Enter the razor.

IF JEFFERSON WERE ALIVE

What would Jefferson think about miracles if he were alive today, when Newton’s causal, objective science has transitioned to a quantum-relativistic worldview? When reason has been dethroned as a reliable guide to how the world works in the domains of the very large and the very small? When consciousness and the role of an observer have been accorded a key role in how the world unfolds? When, as the eminent quantum theorist Henry Stapp of the University of California, Berkeley, has said, “The new physics presents *prima facie* evidence that our human thoughts are linked to nature by nonlocal connections: what a person chooses to do in one region seems immediately to affect what is true elsewhere in the universe . . . [O]ur thoughts . . . DO something” [his emphasis]?⁹ When hundreds of controlled laboratory and clinical experiments show that the healing intentions of one individual correlate with measurable changes in a distant person, and that these changes occur even when animals, plants, and inanimate objects are used as subjects?^{10,11}(pp216-223) Would these experimental findings appear as intolerable miracles to Jefferson? Would they prompt him to go for his razor?

I think not. Jefferson’s mind was big enough to embrace the wondrous. He did not suffer from IDS—imagination defi-

ciency syndrome. For instance, when he sent Lewis and Clark on their epic journey to the Pacific Northwest, he half expected they would return with reports of woolly mammoths roaming the West. When the explorers returned with mastodon fossils, he proudly displayed them in the entry hall at Monticello, his home, which at the time contained the country’s greatest library, and which later served as the backbone of the Library of Congress. No, Jefferson would not be offended by the astonishments of today’s science. He would likely be delighted by them, and his razor would remain in the drawer.

HUME’S SYNDROME

The hero of miracle deniers has long been David Hume, the 18th-century Scottish philosopher, economist, and historian. Hume arbitrarily defined a *miracle* as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition or Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”¹² This is a radical extension beyond the literal meaning of the word. Miracle comes from the Latin *mirari*, “to wonder.” Hume’s extension of “miracle” into the transcendent domain suggested at once that miracles are beyond science, whose focus is on earthly matters. This transcendental interference violated the principles of science, Hume said, and was not acceptable to rational people.

Hume attributed his definition of a miracle to Christianity, although many Christians do not share it. The prime example is St. Augustine, the fourth-century church father who was one of the most important figures in the development of Christianity in the West. Unlike Hume, he insisted that miracles are lawful events, the causes of which we are ignorant. Miracles, in other words, only appear to violate natural law. In the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza, Einstein’s favorite philosopher, sided with St. Augustine. So did Einstein, who remarked, “There are two ways to live one’s life—as if nothing is a miracle, or as if everything is. I believe in the latter.”¹³

Hume does not actually say miracles don’t happen, but he offers several reasons not to believe in them. Miracles, he says, serve as a foundation of the major religions—in Christianity the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth, Jesus turning water into wine and raising Lazarus from the dead, and so on. Believers, Hume said, are

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