

Jefferson's leg, his pocket and his rule for religion



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Thomas Jefferson. A complex figure in history. A freethinking Founder with a broad view of humanity and human nature. Yet, as we clearly see today, his spectacles had a broken lens. In his mind, to fully partake of the promises of independence – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – one needed to be white, male and own property. In his mind “all men are created equal” but we might point out to this “enlightened” man: “Excuse me, sir, but what about those people over there – see those women, and enslaved people, and indigenous tribes who were living free and pursuing happiness before you guys came along?” Then we could help him focus on those damaged glasses.

When it came to religious views, Jefferson seemed to have a less myopic perspective. Freedom to believe what we choose was high on his list of priorities in a secular society. What another person believes should really not be my concern ... until those beliefs truly infringe on my beliefs. One of Jefferson's most cogent quips on this issue appears in his “Notes on the State of Virginia” (1781-82): “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Freely choosing what to believe, or not to believe, doesn't pick anyone's pocket or break anyone's leg. Of

course, if it does indeed pick our pockets (for instance, takes our tax money) or actually breaks our leg (causes physical or mental harm, or breaks down a secular democracy through sectarian legislation), then the belief is injurious and needs to be firmly addressed.

Prior to his eminently-quotable line on pickpockets and leg-breakers, Jefferson laid out the reasons for his clarity on the delicate handling of religion in America. He follows the trail of history from the first settlers who left England during a time when the English church was enjoying “victory over the religious of all other persuasions.” No sooner had these faithful seekers of freedom gained power in the New World that “they showed equal intolerance” toward Presbyterians. Quakers escaped persecution in the old country only to find religious freedom primarily applied to one Christian sect. Over time, in Jefferson's colorful phrase, “other opinions began to creep in.” When 1776 came along, the revolutionary convention ostensibly wiped away “oppressions in religion.” Heresy used to be punished under common law, but under the new Constitution only those who submit to authoritarian faith leaders – “religious slavery” as Jefferson sees it – can judge heretical thinkers. Yet the Man from Monticello speaks for all freethinkers when he affirms: “the rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit.”

Then we have this perceptive passage on pockets and legs – the power of government to protect against injury and the right of the individual to believe what they choose. So long as that choice and practice of faith doesn't pick a pocket (rob anyone) or break anyone's bones (cause harm), the principle of freedom is paramount. Freedom must be balanced by responsibility to others or it disintegrates into a cheapened form: “I can do what I wish and I don't care about any-

one else” (the Plastic Rule, as opposed to the Golden Rule). This attitude potentially creates a society of pickpockets.

Our rational Virginian continues this line of reasoning to address any fracturing effects of religion:

“Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. [Set them loose and] they will support the true religion, by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation. [Reason and free inquiry] are the natural enemies of error....” What does Jefferson mean by “the true religion”? Here we can refer to his cut-and-paste version of the Bible (“The Jefferson Bible” or, as he entitled the book: “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth”). Jefferson admired Jesus as a moral teacher, but since there are many theological beliefs that distract from the ethical teachings of that great man, Jefferson encourages people, such as his nephew Peter, to: “keep your reason firmly on the watch” while reading or considering anything related to belief (Letter to Peter Carr, August 1787).

Picking a mind can be more harmful than picking a pocket. A healthy practice of freethinking can be fractured when a person allows religious servitude to defy or deny the “laws of nature.” This is exactly why Jefferson supports diversity of thought: “Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion.” That seems natural. Though it may be wise to protect our pockets and legs ... as well as our minds.

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