

Thomas Jefferson.

In religion he was a decided Freethinker. "His instincts," says Bancroft, "all inclined him to trace every fact to a general law, and to put faith in ideal truth." During his later years "he watched with deep concern the ceaseless movement of the human soul toward freedom and purity. Dr. Channing became an interesting figure to him, and he hailed with delight the inroads which Channing appeared to be making in what he considered the most pernicious of all priestly devices, the theology of Calvin. It is hard to say which surpassed the other in boiling hatred of Calvinism, Jefferson or John Adams. 'I rejoice,' writes Jefferson in 1822, 'that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience neither to kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving.' In a letter to Colonel Pickering he writes of "the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three." He became even more vehement than this after his eightieth year. He spoke of "the blasphemous absurdity of the five points of Calvin;" of "the hocus-pocus phantasm of a God" created by Calvin, which, "like another Cerberus," had "one body and three heads;" and declared that, in his opinion, "it would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all than to blaspheme him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin." In a letter to Dr. Cooper he says: "In our Richmond there is much fanaticism, but chiefly among the women. They have their night meetings and praying parties where, attended by their priests, and sometimes by a henpecked husband, they pour fourth the effusions of their love to Jesus, in terms as amatory and carnal as their modesty would permit them to use to a mere earthly lover." "The final and complete remedy, he thought, for the 'fever of fanaticism,' was the diffusion of knowledge."

In his "Notes on Virginia," Jefferson declares that "ignorance is preferable to error; and he is less remote from the truth who believes nothing, than he who believes what is wrong." In the same "Notes," while speaking of "the different religions received in that State," he wrote as follows:

"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. If it be said, his testimony in a court of justice cannot be relied on, reject it then, and be the stigma on him. Constraint may make him worse by making him a hypocrite, but it

will never make him a truer man. It may fix him obstinately in his errors, but it will not cure them. Reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose rein to them, they will support the true religion, by bringing every false one to their tribunal, in the test of their investigation. They are the natural enemies of error, and of error only. Had not the Roman Government permitted free enquiry, Christianity could never have been introduced. Had not free enquiry been indulged at the era of the Reformation, the corruptions of Christianity could not have been purged away. If it be restrained now, the present corruptions will be protected, and new ones encouraged. Was the government to prescribe to us our medicine and diet, our bodies would be in such keeping as our souls are now. Thus in France the emetic was once forbidden as a medicine, and the potato as an article of food. Government is just as infallible, too, when it fixes systems of physics. Galileo was sent to the Inquisition for affirming that the earth was a sphere; the government had declared it to be as flat as a trencher, and Galileo was obliged to adjure his error. This error, however, at length prevailed, the earth became a globe, and Descartes declared that it was whirled round its axis by a vortex. The government in which he lived was wise enough to see that this was no question of civil jurisdiction, or we should all have been involved by authority in vortices. In fact, the vortices have been exploded, and the Newtonian principle of gravitation is now more firmly established, on the basis of reason, than it would be were the government to step in, and to make it an article of necessary faith. Reason and experiment have been indulged, and error has fled before them. It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself. Subject opinion to coercion, whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men, men governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? Introduce the bed of Procrustes, then, and as there is danger that the large men may beat the small, make us all of a size, by lopping the former and stretching the latter.

"Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a censor morum over each other. Is uniformity attainable? Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the effect of

coercion? To make one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth. Let us reflect that it is inhabited by a thousand millions of people. That these profess probably a thousand different systems of religion. That ours is but one of that thousand. That if there be but one right, and ours that one, we should wish to see the 999 wandering sects gathered into the field of truth. But against such a majority we cannot effect this by force. Reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments. To make way for these, free inquiry must be indulged; how can we wish others to indulge it while we refuse it ourselves? But every state, says an inquisitor, has established some religion. No two, says I, have established the same. Is this a proof of the infallibility of establishments? Our sister states of Pennsylvania and New York, however, have long subsisted without any establishment at all. The experiment was new and doubtful when they made it. It has answered beyond conception. They flourished infinitely. Religion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough; all sufficient to preserve peace and order; or if a sect arises, whose tenets would subvert morals, good sense has fair play, and reasons and laughs it out of doors without suffering the state to be troubled with it. They do not hang more malefactors than we do. They are not more disturbed with religious dissensions than we are. On the contrary, their harmony is unparalleled, and can be ascribed to nothing but their unbounded tolerance, because there is no other circumstance in which they differ from every nation on earth. They have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them. Let us too give this experiment fair play, and get rid while we may of those tyrannical laws. It is true we are as yet secured against them by the spirit of the times. I doubt whether the people of this country would suffer an execution for heresy, or a three years' imprisonment for not comprehending the mysteries of the Trinity. But is the spirit of the people our infallible, a permanent reliance? Is it government? Is this the kind of protection we receive in return for the rights we give up? Besides, the spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless. A single zealot may commence persecution, and better men be his victims. It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis, is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united. From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill. It will not then be necessary to resort every movement to the people for support.

They will be forgotten, therefore, and their rights disregarded. They will forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights. The shackles, therefore, which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain on us long, will be made heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion."

"It is for the benefit of mankind to mitigate the horrors of war as much as possible. The practice, therefore, of modern nations, of treating captive enemies with politeness and generosity, is not only delightful in contemplation, but really interesting to all the world—friends, foes, and neutral."

These sentences, among others, he addressed to his nephew, Peter Carr, in college, in 1787:

"Religion. In the first place divest yourself of all bias in favor of novelty and singularity of opinion. Indulge them on any other subject rather than on that of religion. On the other hand, shake off all the fears and servile prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of Reason than of blind-folded fear. You will naturally examine, first, the religion of your own country. Read the Bible, then, as you would Livy or Tacitus. For example, in the book of Joshua we are told the sun stood still for several hours. Were we to read that fact in Livy or Tacitus, we should class it with their showers of blood, speaking of their statues, beasts, etc. But it is said that the writer of that book was inspired. Examine, therefore, candidly, what evidence there is of his having been inspired. The pretension is entitled to your inquiry, because millions believe it. On the other hand, you are astronomer enough to know how contrary it is to the law of nature. You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: First, of those who say he was begotten of God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and second, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out with pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law, which punished the first commission of that offense by whipping, and the second by exile, or death in furca. Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you