Letters to the Editor

Editor: *Indiana Magazine of History*

One of the articles in your special Thomas Jefferson issue ended on an especially discordant note. For most of the article, "Sphinx without a Riddle: Joseph Ellis and the Art of Jefferson Biography," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XCV (June 1999), 178-195, George M. Curtis III defends Jefferson against Ellis's aspersions, among other things criticizing the latter's anti-Jefferson biases, tendency to project his own morose view of the American Revolution's "failure" onto Jefferson, and neglect to examine his subject's pre-Revolutionary career and legal and constitutional thought. However, after imputing illogical thinking to Ellis, in his last paragraph, in which he chides Ellis for failing to mention that Jefferson refused to make provision for a department of theology at the University of Virginia, Curtis goes bonkers, melodramatically stigmatizing Jefferson's desire for a secular institution as an authoritarian, fascistic "dark note" on his "commitment to liberty" and, ironically, the most unique part of his "legacy": "This denial [i.e., the absence of theology courses from the University curriculum], masked as a tribute to academic freedom and individual liberty of choice, failed to hide the assault upon inquiry into ideas and convictions central to the quest for liberty throughout much of the history of western civilizations" (201). Curtis's brief, unreasoning attack on Jefferson's attitudes to religious teaching has been implicitly refuted by numerous leading scholars on Jefferson's religious thought (Daniel Dreisbach, Edwin Scott Gaustad, Isaac Kramnick) in the October 1999 *William and Mary Quarterly*, which coincidentally contains six articles on this topic. Perhaps Jefferson himself provides his best defense, in a letter that he wrote precisely on the matter that so arouses Professor Curtis's ire. To Dr. Thomas Cooper, himself a fervid deist anticlerical, Jefferson wrote on November 2, 1822, when his university was in the planning stages:

> In our University you know there is no professorship of divinity. A handle has been made of this to disseminate an idea that this is an institution, not merely of no religion, but against all religion. Occasion was taken at the last meeting of the Visitors, to bring forward an idea which might silence this calumny, which weighed on the minds of some honest friends to the institution. In our annual report to the legislature, after stating the constitutional reasons against a public establishment of any religious instruction, we suggest the expedient of encouraging the different religious sects to establish each for itself a professorship of their own tenets, on the confines of the University, so near as that their students may attend the lectures there, and have the free use of our library, and every other accomodation [*sic*] we can give them; preserving however their independence of us & of each other. This fills the chasm objected to ours, as a defect in an institution professing to give instruction in *all* useful sciences [TJ's italics]. I think the invitation will be accepted by some sects from candid intentions, and by others from jealousy and rivalship. And by bringing the sects together, and mixing them with the mass of other students, we shall soften their asperities, liberalise and neutralise their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason and morality. [Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, November 2, 1822, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, Reel 53]

In addition, the Report of the University's Board of Visitors, October 7, 1822, composed primarily by Jefferson, made clear that the University's students would be allowed to visit the projected divinity schools for religious services: "Such establishments [the divinity schools] would offer the further and great advantage of enabling the students of the University to attend religious exercises with the professor of their particular sect, either in the rooms of the building still to be erected, and destined to that purpose under impartial regulations [i.e., spaces in which every denomination would be entitled to hold religious observances] . . . or in the lecturing room of such professor." [Report of Board of Visitors, October 7, 1822, in Nathaniel F. Cabell, ed., *Early History of the University of Virginia as Contained in the Letters of Thomas Jefferson and Joseph C. Cabell* (Richmond, Va., 1865), 474-475.]

In any case, while Jefferson—fearless that orthodox minds might have an invidious impact on his students—was willing to permit divinity students to visit the secular realms of the University, where they might conceivably be tempted to abandon their religious studies for his college's worldly ones (as Robert M. Healey argues) [Robert M. Healey, *Jefferson on Religion in Public Education* (New Haven, Conn., 1962), 222-223], it was equally likely that his own students from the University might desert their secular studies after exposure to the august halls of the neighboring divinity schools in the course of their weekly (or oftener) worship. Indeed, before he died, Jefferson set aside a room in the University of Virginia's Rotunda for religious services. Ironically, in 1832 the students initiated a movement, with the approval of the faculty and Visitors, to raise funds for the employment of a chaplain, preliminary to a great religious revival on campus. [Virginius Dabney, *Mr. Jefferson's University: A History* (Charlottesville, Va., 1981), 12-13; Donald G. Tewkesbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War* (New York, 1932), 152.]

Therefore, it seems to me that Professor Curtis's concluding remarks were surprisingly unwarranted and misinformed. I hope you will be able to print this letter as a kind of correction of his misinterpretations.

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Despite Mr. Scherr's unfortunate proclivity for name-calling, he does raise an issue worth further eludication. A cursory survey of the Jefferson literature reveals several interesting points. Some biographers avoid any mention of the controversy over theological studies; others such as Ellis see the question from a twentieth-century reading of the "wall of separation" doctrine (an interpretation, incidentally, cast in substantial doubt in the "Forum" essays in the October 1999 issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*), a doctrine that has assumed a position of civil religion in the minds of some; and a few, a very few, seek to understand both the context of the establishment of the institution and Jefferson's various and often conflicting personal, intellectual, and political interests. The historical context as well as the historiography is convoluted, to say the least. Jefferson's age, his gloomy sense of American decline, his mounting dislike for evangelical Presbyterians, his pride of ownership of the new university, and his long-standing ambition to create an educational institution in his image gave this final chapter a complex plot. Added to this were political considerations that surfaced in Richmond and elsewhere as Virginia faced the formidable task of adding to its higher education investment, historically concentrated in William and Mary. The lightning rod of Thomas Cooper became the point where all the swirling and diverse interests seemed to converge. The result was a storm of controversy, one for which many biographers suggest that Jefferson was ill prepared.

On most of these matters, particularly the Cooper controversy that Scherr alludes to, Ellis remains silent. Instead, he elects to pair Jefferson's general interest in banning theological studies with carefully controlling the study of government so as to protect students from "the treasonable thoughts of 'rank Federalists and consolidationists.'" Of course his objective in this was the creation of the carefully crafted citizen of a Jeffersonian republic, the ideal extension of the model Jefferson introduced in his first inaugural address. While he soon withdrew his prescriptions for political reading after Madison cautioned against politicizing the curriculum, Jefferson remained adamant on the question of excluding theology. Several biographers, particularly Merrill Peterson, craft a context wherein the reader is encouraged to see the long-term development of Jefferson's interest in education coupled with his growing concern for the quality of citizenship in the new nation. These strong convictions merged in Jefferson's investment in the University of Virginia. Significantly, his concerns for the degradation of American politics, his displeasure with evangelicalism, and his dismissal of Presbyterian theology combined in distinct ways over the years, culminating in his angry November 1822 outburst to Cooper.

For his part, Ellis, in concluding his discussion of the founding, celebrates Jefferson's innovative use of time and space. Ellis notes Jef-

ferson's elimination of traditional student grade classifications. Unfortunately he does not conflate this with a notice of Jefferson's advocacy of free election of academic courses. Finally, Ellis elaborates upon one of Jefferson's most important contributions to American education—the remarkable architecture that brought student and faculty together in an inward looking "academical village." At this point Ellis was in an enviable position to comment upon the implications of this geography for the Cooper letter that Scherr quoted, since space and time figured centrally in this exchange as well. Most of Jefferson's biographers agree that early in his thoughts about the university Jefferson conceived an architectural plan. It is important also to remember that Jefferson's antipathy for Presbyterian evangelicals was of long standing. The letter to Cooper, then, was frosting on an old cake. Unfortunately, Mr. Scherr chooses not to quote from the previous paragraphs of Jefferson's letter where he excoriated "the growth of Presbyterianism," but clearly, the paragraph that he does select deserves to be understood in the context of the paragraphs that precede it.

Contemporaries and historians alike have pondered Jefferson's recommended remedy for the Presbyterian updating in Virginia of Benjamin Rush's call for the study of Christianity as a necessary adjunct of republican education. Mr. Scherr, like Leonard Levy before him, seeks to celebrate Jefferson as an unwavering champion of religious liberty, going to some lengths to argue that the Danbury letter controversy supports such a view. All of this is based in part upon Jefferson's politically astute proposal in 1822 to permit different religious sects to establish "a professorship of their own tenets, on the confines of the university." On the surface this has come to mean in the minds of some historians a nod by Jefferson to disinterested neutrality, a balanced approach to state-sponsored education in the early nineteenth century.

As charmingly sophistic as this appears, no one yet has plumbed the vagaries of "confines" with any real success. So there is a residue of the disingenuous about Jefferson's last ditch fix for a mounting political storm occasioned by suspicions born of his policy forbidding theological studies coupled with his advocacy for Cooper. Surely no one would mistake a principled stand on religious liberty with the notion Jefferson offered up here. Those with a special religious interest were promised a separate tent on the outside edge of the intentionally confined campfire that was the new "academical village." Situated on the periphery of this new state institution these outsiders, so conspicuous in their separateness, would become the special projects for professors at the university suddenly vested with the cause to "make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality." The Jefferson conclusion revealed a clear state purpose, then, one that did not suggest neutrality so much as a desiccated rendering of free inquiry. At the new university content-based dis-

crimination was now given the muscle of the police power of the state. Mr. Scherr is correct in stating that this is a most important chapter in Jefferson's life. It is one that suggests the play of light and dark in ways that deserve the most careful attention, for the consequences of some of these decisions would resurface years later in far, far different guises in the world of burgeoning state universities. It may well turn out to be one of the sad ironies in the Jefferson legacy that in casting out centuries of inquiry all in the name of freedom from ecclesiastical monopoly, Jefferson opened the door for the exercise of discriminatory power on the part of the state that brought forth a very different monopoly indeed.

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