

Religious Foundations: The
Educational and Conceptual Designs
of the founding of Mr. Jefferson's
University

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Thesis

- Thomas Jefferson is known for founding the University of Virginia (UVA), crown achievement of his retirement years
- This also encompassed his own beliefs and passion for education in America
- Jefferson was also known for his unique, yet controversial, religious beliefs
- Despite this, Jefferson still blended the two when he founded UVA.
- While certainly not founded as a purely religious institution, Jefferson did found UVA with Christian concepts to help shape the school to what he wanted it to be



Introducing: Thomas Jefferson

- Founding father, lawyer, Governor of Virginia, President of the United States
- Had deep religious beliefs, however they were very different for his time
- Had a deep passion for education in America
- One thing he wanted to be remembered for was founding the University of Virginia



Jefferson and Religion

- Jefferson grew up a devout 18th century Anglican
- Beliefs changed throughout his life
- He did not believe in the Holy Trinity, the power of prayer, the atonement of sins, or biblical miracles
- "The question of his (Jesus) being a member of the Godhead... is foreign to the present view (the Syllabus of the Doctrines of Jesus), which is merely an estimate of the intrinsic merit of his doctrines... To the corruption of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian."



Jefferson and Education: Background

- As a boy, Jefferson attended the schools of his local churches, then eventually attended the College of William and Mary
- He wanted to model education after the New England structure where there was a school for the local county
- The higher students would move to the university level and lower students would be trained as teachers for primary level
- His idea was in a pyramid like form:
 - Primary/grade school at ward/town level
 - Secondary at county level
 - University at state level



Blending Religion and Education

- Jefferson believed religion linked with morality, and that morality was linked to education
- A proper education would steer people away from corruption and immorality
- Jefferson believed the Bible should be taught at an older age because children were not mature enough to understand its complexity
- Jefferson included religious truths in school curriculum as long as they were rational, universal, and “neutral,” meaning not exclusive to one denomination.



Religion and UVA

- Faculty came from many backgrounds, there was no Professor of Divinity only to not favor one denomination over another
- Library had writings from many religious figures including Cyril, St. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Bellarmine
- Jefferson had chaplains come to the university on a rotation schedule, even authorized the rotunda to be used as a chapel on Sundays



Conclusion

- Jefferson, despite his complex religious beliefs, had a deep vision for UVA that included religion
- Jefferson was not an orthodox Christian, but he still saw its value in society and education and implemented it when he founded UVA
- UVA was not a religious affiliated school, but it did include religion in the faculty, academics, and campus life
- To say UVA was founded as a purely secular would be a misunderstanding, non-sectarian would be a better way to describe it



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