

2023 Research Week Abstract

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

Program of Study- American History

Presentation- Oral Presentation

Subtype- Textual or Investigative

Mentor and Mentor Email- Dr. Benjamin Esswein (btesswein@liberty.edu)

Student Name and email- Schuyler Ogden (sogden7@liberty.edu)

This paper examines the religious concepts and influences that Thomas Jefferson used when he founded the University of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson is remembered for many things, including but not limited to; author of the Declaration of Independence, third president of the United States, first Secretary of State, and being the father of the University of Virginia (UVA), the latter being one of his most proud achievements. The common thought is Jefferson founded the University of Virginia to be the first secular university in America with no ties to religion at all, particularly Christianity. This paper analyzes how Thomas Jefferson had no intentions of blocking religion from his university. Jefferson's religious beliefs were complicated, and they changed over time, however, Jefferson still implemented religious concepts and influences in the founding of UVA not just within course curriculum, but in nonacademic settings too. Jefferson's own writing and various documents indicate that Jefferson sought support from various religious groups and even used the Rotunda as a chapel on Sundays. Thomas Jefferson came to value education and religious freedom so much that he wanted UVA to be a school where students could get the quality education he believed they deserved while also not having the restrictions

of a particular denomination telling them how to think. In other words, they had the freedom to make their own choices and chart their own course. While certainly not founded as a traditional religious institution, Thomas Jefferson did find the University of Virginia with religious concepts to help shape the school to what he wanted it to be.

Christian worldview- My Christian worldview gave me a lot of help with writing this paper. Since Thomas Jefferson is a very complicated figure to study in American history, it is easy to make assumptions on different aspects about his life. Going into this paper, I had an idea of what it was I was looking for, but my conclusion was by no means predetermined. My Christian worldview helped the evidence and documents lead me to where it was, regardless of where that destination was. This helped me observe Thomas Jefferson's life with proper historical context without judging him. To study Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs is to understand the mind of the man himself and the things that influenced him and my Christian worldview allowed me to get as much of the full picture and search for the truth. When looking at the University of Virginia, studying Thomas Jefferson's life and beliefs gave me a full understanding of why he made UVA the way it was. Jefferson was a major champion for religious freedom and he wanted his university to encompass those freedoms as well. Since many colleges in America at the time were controlled by particular denominations, Jefferson wanted people, including Christians, all kinds of backgrounds to have the freedom and equal opportunity to pursue their goals. This research impacts culture at large because it is a demonstration of asking a question in history and using many sources of evidence to help bring you to that answer. It is an overall example of letting the evidence take to where it leads and not being afraid to see the final destination, the main thing that my Christian worldview has done for me.