

ABSTRACT

Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre:

Encountering Issues of Church and State

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This thesis seeks to compare and contrast how Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre encountered the issues of church and state during their lifetimes. Both figures were faced with revolution in an Age of Enlightenment and both were undoubtedly influential figures in their respective revolutions. In matters of church and state, both Jefferson and Robespierre argued that the basis of morality the freedom of conscience were essential matters to study. However, the two came to strikingly different conclusions about what role the state should play in religion. Jefferson concluded that there should be a separation of church and state. Robespierre, on the other hand, concluded that the state must be directly involved in religion. Though he praised religious freedom, Robespierre played a leading role in the creation of a state-lead religion. In order to understand these differences, this thesis explores the similarities and differences in their personal faith, geography, culture, and education.

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THOMAS JEFFERSON AND MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE:
ENCOUNTERING ISSUES OF CHURCH AND STATE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.	1
Chapter One: Religion and the Enlightenment.	5
Chapter Two: Thomas Jefferson: Religion and the State.	16
Chapter Three: Maximilien Robespierre: Religion and the State.	38
Conclusion.	61
Works Cited.	66

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to compare and contrast the roles of Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre in the development of church-state issues in the United States and France. Though this thesis will examine Jefferson and Robespierre from childhood to adulthood, it will focus primarily on the Revolutionary period of the late eighteenth century which saw the most changes in the relationship between church and state. Before looking specifically at Jefferson and Robespierre, this thesis will provide a general overview of religion and the Enlightenment and the major religious issues that resulted from an expansion in scientific knowledge, such as the growing opposition to religious authority and arguments for non-religious bases of morality.

The chapters on Jefferson and Robespierre have each been divided into four main sections. The first examines the individual's personal faith and the major influences that shaped his beliefs and relationship to organized religion. The second section examines their understanding and ideas on the church-state issues, specifically whether religion is the basis of morality and whether freedom of religion should be a basic right for all people. An important feature of these sections is the role the Enlightenment played in shaping Jefferson and Robespierre's ideas on the relationship between church and state. The third section examines how the two revolutionaries sought to implement their church-state ideas. This section focuses most closely on the American and French Revolutions as it was during these Revolutions that the majority of these changes occurred. The final section examines briefly whether the changes that Jefferson and

Robespierre implemented lasted beyond the era of the American and French Revolutions and, if so, in what form did they remain.

The topic of this thesis is important because of the fact that many of the issues Jefferson and Robespierre dealt with during their lifetimes are still relevant today in the United States, France, and many other countries. Today, many nations still struggle over the relationship between the state and religion. In the United States, disagreements have arisen over the national motto, “In God we trust,” which appears on American currency as well as the reference to God in the Pledge of Allegiance.¹ Presently, the Supreme Court of the United States is presiding over the case *Sebelius vs. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* in which the question of whether or not corporations have religious freedom has been raised.² In France, Muslim women are challenging a French law banning the full-face veils, arguing that the law encroaches on their right to religious freedom.³ In 2004, the French National Assembly banned all religious symbols from public schools.⁴

Jefferson and Robespierre were chosen for comparison due to their active involvement in the church-state issues during their lifetimes and their positions as leaders

¹ For examples of these issues, see the news coverage in: Nick Wing, “‘In God We Trust’ Lawsuit: Freedom from Religion Foundation Sues to Remove Phrase from Currency,” *The Huffington Post*, March 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/13/in-god-we-trust-lawsuit_n_2867227.html (accessed April 7, 2014). & Jeffrey Owen Jones, “The Man Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2003, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-man-who-wrote-the-pledge-of-allegiance-93907224/> (accessed April 7, 2014).

² Supreme Court of the United States “Oral Arguments: *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*,” *Supreme Court of the United States*, March 25, 2014, http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/13-354_5436.pdf (accessed April 7, 2014).

³ “French Veil Law: Muslim Woman’s Challenge in Strasbourg,” *BBC*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25118160> (accessed April 7, 2014).

⁴ Elaine Sciolino, “French Assembly Votes to Ban Religious Symbols in Schools,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/11/world/french-assembly-votes-to-ban-religious-symbols-in-schools.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

during their respective revolutions. In addition, the two revolutionaries were both heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas, which permits an examination of the role that the Enlightenment played in shaping church-state relations.

Both primary and secondary sources were used in this thesis. For the first chapter on Religion and the Enlightenment, the works of four twentieth and twenty-first century historians were primarily relied on. The first, Ernst Cassirer, was a German historian who concentrated on the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In his work *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Cassirer studies the Enlightenment from a European perspective, but concentrates most on the German Enlightenment, including German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. The second historian, Paul Hazard, was a French historian who also concentrated on the philosophy of the Enlightenment. In contrast to Cassirer, Hazard refers most often to the French Enlightenment in his work, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle; De Montesquieu à Lessing*. Gertrude Himmelfarb, the third historian cited, is an American historian who concentrated most on the English Enlightenment and the moral philosophers in her work *The Roads to Modernity; the British, French, and American Enlightenment*. The final historian, Jonathan Israel, is a British historian who concentrates on the more extreme Enlightenment ideas. In his works *Radical Enlightenment; Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* and *A Revolution of the Mind; radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Israel discusses the rise and implications of the Radical Enlightenment which he argues originated in The Netherlands with the work of Baruch Spinoza and spread to France.

For the chapter on Jefferson, the majority of primary sources come from his letters available in the online United States National archives. Other primary sources include

letters written to Jefferson and other writings from Jefferson's contemporaries. The secondary sources used for this chapter included the works of the historians listed above and a number of Jefferson biographies written by Jon Meacham, Saul K. Padover, Merrill D. Peterson, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation.

For the chapter on Robespierre, the majority of the primary sources came from his recorded speeches. Unlike the works of Jefferson, the works of Robespierre have a limited electronic or online presence which limited their availability. Other primary sources used include letters, memoirs, and other writings from contemporaries. Controversies about Robespierre's ideas and career before and after his death sparked strong reactions, both positive and negative, from his contemporaries and biographers. In this thesis, both positive and negative profiles of Robespierre were used, including the memoirs of his positively biased sister, Charlotte, and his negatively biased school teacher, the abbé Proyard. A number of biographies of Robespierre were used, including those of Ruth Scurr, J.M. Thompson, and Charles F. Warwick. Other sources for this chapter include Simon Schama's detailed history of the French Revolution, *Citizens; A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, and the Enlightenment historians mentioned earlier.

By examining Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre's involvement in church-state issues, this thesis intends to determine why these two revolutionaries differed in their conclusions of what the proper relationship between religion and the state should be despite their similar, Enlightenment-influenced backgrounds.

CHAPTER ONE:

Religion and the Enlightenment

Sapere aude!

Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding; this is the motto of the Enlightenment.

– Immanuel Kant⁵

With his famous words above, Kant captured the spirit of the Enlightenment in a single phrase. As the seventeenth century moved towards a close, an Age of Reason was taking hold of Europe. Scientific discoveries led to a new understanding of the world. With new ways of looking at the physical world, many curious men of letters began to turn their eyes toward the spiritual world.

While a complete history of the Enlightenment would be impossible to recount, a brief understanding of this period in history is essential to understanding both Thomas Jefferson's and Maximilien Robespierre's involvement with the issues of church and state during their respective revolutions. Following is only a very brief history of an era that spanned decades and significantly changed history, not only in Europe, but eventually throughout the world.

The Enlightenment was, at its core, a scientific and philosophical movement that praised reason and human progress.⁶ As science advanced human understanding of the

⁵ Quoted and translated in: Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951): 163.

⁶ "Enlightenment," *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/188441/Enlightenment> (accessed March 30, 2014).

physical world, a new respect for human knowledge was found. Most Enlightenment thinkers took this new age in an optimistic stride, such as Diderot, who determined that all human knowledge could be amassed into one grand *Encyclopédie*.⁷ These optimistic thinkers believed that if it was “possible to improve men’s ideas about the world and about the structure of reality,” human existence would “significantly improve.”⁸ With advances in science and social understanding, society would become increasingly stable. Natural disasters and sickness would be approached with reason instead of superstitious fear of the supernatural and social issues would be met with tolerance rather than blind hatred.⁹

As with any historical era, the Enlightenment did not have any definitive beginning or end. The spirit of the Enlightenment began to spread in the mid-seventeenth century and by the beginning of the eighteenth century educated Europeans could not escape its influence. This new age of reason grew partly out of the Renaissance ideas of humanism. The value of education and empirical knowledge that had grown during the Renaissance became more refined and led to the scientific experimentation that defined the Enlightenment.¹⁰ Due to the work of Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, among others, scientific knowledge progressed exponentially during the Enlightenment. Reason went to war with superstition as physical laws were discovered which ruled not

⁷ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity; The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 8-9.

⁸ Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind; Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010): 1.

⁹ Ibid.: 1-2.

¹⁰ “Enlightenment,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

only the Earth, but all celestial bodies.¹¹

While the Enlightenment era is most often paired with scientific advancement, it also influenced many other facets of human life, the most important being philosophy and theology. By praising reason, the Enlightenment ignited significant changes in epistemology which in turn called into question many theological assumptions. Though traditional religious authority had encountered a significant setback during the Protestant Reformation, in Europe the churches were the traditional authority on all matters pertaining to God's creation. For centuries, the highest forms of human knowledge came not from reason or scientific experimentation, but from religious texts and the Church. The Enlightenment challenged this. With the growing reality of a seemingly ordered world ruled by scientific and mathematical laws, humans began to turn to science and reason for answers that they had once looked for in religion.¹² In his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope captures this new basis of knowledge in his verses:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.¹³

The epistemological shift from religion to reason was not ignored by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. As the era progressed, there grew an increasing concern about the future of religion and of the authority of religious hierarchies. Faced with such a change in traditional authority, Enlightenment thinkers began to ponder of the implications of mixing reason with religion. These thinkers were divided into two major groups – the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 3-36. See chapter on “The Mind of the Enlightenment.”

¹³ Alexander Pope, “Essay on Man,” *Electronic Classics Series*, Jim Manis, ed. (Hazleton: Pennsylvania State University, 1999): 13.

moral philosophers of England and the *philosophes* of France.¹⁴ Both groups theorized over similar matters, such as the basis of morality and the role of freedom of conscience in a new Enlightened world that both Jefferson and Robespierre found important. Despite the similarities of the subjects they encountered, the two groups were strikingly different in a number of ways.

Twentieth century historians of the Enlightenment today disagree over whether the Enlightenment worked to destroy or modify religion.¹⁵ Some, like Ernst Cassirer, argue that the Enlightenment sought only to modify religion. In his *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Cassirer argues that any apparent opposition to religion came not from a determination to destroy religion, but as a natural consequence of the attempt to solve new intellectual problems, for “intellectual problems are fused with religious problems.”¹⁶ Paul Hazard is of a similar mind as Cassirer on the matter. Hazard points to Anglican apologists to give evidence of the modifying spirit of the Enlightenment. Their goal was not the destruction of religion, but the rehabilitation of religion in the light of new knowledge.¹⁷

Some historians, like Jonathan Israel argue that certain groups of Enlightenment thinkers did attempt to destroy religion.¹⁸ He does not disagree that there was an effort to modify religious belief, but he argues that efforts to destroy religion were stronger than

¹⁴ Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity*: 25.

¹⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 134-136.

¹⁶ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 136.

¹⁷ Paul Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle; De Montesquieu à Lessing* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1963) : 87.

¹⁸ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: vi, 66.

historians like Hazard thought them to be.¹⁹ In order to separate the different religious goals of the Enlightenment, Israel organized Enlightenment thinkers into three general groups – conservatives, moderates, and radicals.²⁰ The conservative group was made up of those who determined that religion should keep its traditional place of power. Religious texts and teachings should remain the sole source of ultimate truth and the formulation of human understanding despite the growing increase of scientific knowledge.

On the opposite side from the conservatives were the radicals. This group, most active in France, sought to destroy traditional religion and replace it with pantheism or materialism.²¹ The radicals saw in the progress of the Enlightenment evidence that all things are connected and unified into one and found little merit in the organized religions of the day.²² The rise of science led some radicals to question the practicality of religion. Diderot once warned:

Once one sets foot in this realm of the supernatural, there are no bounds. Someone affirms that five thousand persons have been fed with five small loaves; this is fine! But tomorrow another will assure you that he fed five thousand people with one small loaf, and the following day a third will have fed five thousand with the wind.²³

As the conservative faction of the Enlightenment, made up of many of the clergy

¹⁹ Stuurman, “Pathway to the Enlightenment: From Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel”: 229.

²⁰ Ibid.: 228.

²¹ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*: 16-17; 19-21.

²² Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment; Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 232.

²³ Quoted in Bruce L. Shelley, *History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995): 318.

themselves, continued to rank Christian faith above reason, the radicals reacted strongly. An example of this reaction can be seen during the French Revolution with the sweeping actions of dechristianization. Strong feelings of anticlericalism led many Frenchmen and women into the streets to demonstrate the Church and its dangerous hold on France. Churches were desecrated and cemeteries were stripped of any religious symbolism.²⁴ One particularly zealous dechristianizer, Joseph Fouché, posted the words “Death is but an eternal sleep” on the gates of one these vandalized cemeteries.²⁵ Not all radicals sought to destroy religion. As will be seen in the following chapters, Robespierre objected to this dechristianization movement.²⁶

The conservatives and the radicals took opposite positions on how to engage religion in a world of reasoned thinking. The moderates, however, sought to join the merits of reason and of religion. Israel describes this moderate Enlightenment as the “two-substance,” (namely reason and religion), versus the “one-substance,” radical Enlightenment.²⁷ The moderates argued that reconciliation between religion and reason could be achieved if one thought of God as a reasoning being who had created the physical laws that the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment had discovered.

One product of the moderate merging reason and religion was deism.²⁸ Deism was particularly popular in the English Enlightenment and subsequently found a

²⁴ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 777.

²⁵ Quoted in Schama, *Citizens*: 777.

²⁶ Ibid.: 778-779.

²⁷ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*: 19.

²⁸ Stuurman, “Pathway to the Enlightenment: From Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel”: 228.

following in the English American colonies. Jefferson was a follower of this moderate Enlightenment. As will be seen in the following chapter, Jefferson spent much of his life trying to reconcile science with the seemingly impossible miracles found in the Christian Bible.²⁹

The Enlightenment's efforts to modernize religion caused a number of changes. Though all facets of religion were modified in one way or another, the three most important issues that the Enlightenment called into question were the authority of the clergy, the basis of morality, and whether freedom of conscience, specifically freedom of religion, was a basic right of all. Though Jefferson and Robespierre would come to different conclusions about the issues, both found that the latter two were the most important issues.

The diminishing of the authority of religious hierarchies in Europe began with the Protestant Reformation. However, according to Israel, it was not until the Enlightenment that the authority of the Church was significantly damaged.³⁰ Though the Reformation had highlighted the corrupt nature of some clerics and institutions, the Enlightenment provided an alternative system. The Enlightenment praised individual liberty and equality that went counter to the Church's hierarchy of ecclesiastical authority.³¹ Many Enlightenment thinkers attacked religious authority directly. In a section of the famous *Encyclopédie* entitled "*Puissance papale*," it was written:

*On ne sauroit considérer sans étonnement que le chef d'une
église, qui n'a, dit-elle, que les armes spirituelles de la*

²⁹ An example of this can be found in Jefferson's *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, discussed in the following chapter.

³⁰ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: vi-vii.

³¹ Schama, *Citizens*: 316.

*parole de Dieu...ait eu la hardiesse d'aspirer à une domination absolue sur tous les rois de la terre: mais il est encore plus étonnant que ce dessein chimérique lui ait si bien réussi.*³²

While both Jefferson and Robespierre spoke out against the unjustified power of the clergy, both Anglican and Catholic, the two revolutionaries were more concerned with how the Enlightenment dealt with the issues of the basis of morality and freedom of conscience. These two issues played key roles in both the American and French Revolutions, the products of which can still be seen today.

When some Enlightenment writers began to question the need for religion, others were forced to ponder over the true basis of morality. Traditionally, religion was understood to provide this basis of morality. Man learned the difference between right and wrong by following the teachings of the Bible and instructions of the clergy. When religious authority was called into question, Enlightenment thinkers began to wonder whether the basis of morality was not religious, but rational.³³ This “secular conception” of morality was promoted by the radical Enlightenment for its outright rejection of ecclesiastical authority. This also allowed for the possibility of a complete separation of religion from the state since it could no longer be argued that religion must confine its place of power as the foundation of a moral society.³⁴

The second idea on the basis of morality was that of the “moral sense.” This phrase, credited to the Earl of Shaftesbury, suggested the idea that morality is “implanted

³² Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers," *ARTFL Encyclopédie Project*, Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, ed., <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/> (accessed August 20, 2013).

³³ Hazard, *La pensée européenne*: 165.

³⁴ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*: 156-157.

in our nature.”³⁵ In other words, morality comes not from the ability to use reason to discover the differences between right and wrong, or from religious teachings, but rather from an ingrained sense placed in humans by nature or God.³⁶

A third idea on the basis of morality came out of John Locke’s theory that the human mind at birth was a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate to be filled with ideas of morality from sense experience. At its core, this idea ran counter to the belief in an innate “moral sense.”³⁷ It held that morality was dependent on moral influences of outside sources including, but not limited to, religion.

Of the three theories of the basis of morality, Jefferson agreed most with the idea of a “moral sense” while Robespierre believed reason as a basis of religion to be most accurate. However, both were convinced that religion played an important role in keeping public morality in place. This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapters.

The issue of the freedom of conscience was brought to the forefront during the Enlightenment.³⁸ As ideas of equality and individualism began to change society, many Enlightenment thinkers questioned the extent to which freedom of conscience was a basic right of man. As traditional sources of authority began to break down, people began to discover that, by using their natural ability to reason, they could think for themselves. As Kant had demanded in the quote that begun this chapter, people began to use their own

³⁵ Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity*: 27.

³⁶ Ibid.: 28.

³⁷ Ibid.: 26.

³⁸ Because this essay deals specifically with the topic of religion, the phrase “freedom of conscience” will often be used synonymously with “freedom of religion.” This is not to say that the Enlightenment did not play a role in the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, etc..

understanding.³⁹

New ideas about religion and God began to spread as people put what they had been taught by the Church to the test. As religious beliefs began to diversify, a need for religious toleration grew. Creating this religious tolerance was not easy, however. The progress of the Enlightenment “breathed vivid awareness of the great difficulty of spreading toleration [and] curbing religious fanaticism.”⁴⁰ The history of Europe had encountered too many religious wars to let go of ingrained religious prejudice. Many hoped, however, that as Enlightenment progressed, religious toleration and, eventually, freedom of religion would be commonplace in society. Voltaire held these optimistic views, hoping that the day had finally come for the end of the period of religious wars.⁴¹

As will be seen in the following chapters, both Jefferson and Robespierre determined that freedom of conscience should be a natural right of man. Though they agreed on this point, Robespierre concluded that a state religion could coexist with religious freedom, while Jefferson argued that religious freedom was only possible with a complete separation of church and state.

Both Jefferson and Robespierre were fundamentally shaped by the Enlightenment. Their education, religion, and understanding of the world were a result of the changes that the Enlightenment had instituted before either of the two revolutionaries was born. As will be seen in the following chapters, the personal faith and political ideas of Jefferson and Robespierre were strongly influenced by Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Newton. Understanding the Enlightenment and the

³⁹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 163.

⁴⁰ Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*: 3.

⁴¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 169.

implications it had on society and religion are essential to understanding the character and actions of Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre.

CHAPTER TWO

Thomas Jefferson: Religion and the State

In the spring of 2010, trouble was brewing in Austin. Members of the Texas Board of Education had gathered together to decide on a number of controversial changes to the state curriculum. Among these changes was the removal of Thomas Jefferson from the list of individuals whose writings impacted the political revolutions from 1750 onward.⁴² The news of Jefferson's removal shocked many. Why had Jefferson been taken off this list he had rightly earned a place on with the penning of the Declaration of Independence? The answer might be baffling to some. The issue was over Jefferson's involvement in guaranteeing the separation of church and state.

Luckily for the schoolchildren of Texas, Jefferson was added back onto the list shortly before the final vote.⁴³ However, the fact that the Texas Board of Education even considered removing Jefferson from such a list suggests that Jefferson's involvement with the separation of church and state is still a relevant topic today.

⁴² "Proposed Revisions to 19 TAC Chapter 113, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies, Subchapter C, High School and 19 TAC Chapter 118, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise Subchapter A, High School; Approved for second reading and final adoption" (proposal approved by the Texas Board of Education on May 21, 2010).

⁴³ Ibid. For media coverage on the curriculum changes see: James C. McKinley Jr., "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change", *The New York Times*, March 23, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1392015765-5Pdv4EzOyLhT8nUSuhkhMg. And: Need to Know Editor, "Texas School Board Approves Controversial Textbook Changes", *Need to Know on PBS*, May 23, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/culture/texas-school-board-approves-controversial-textbook-changes/954/>.

Personal Faith

Before delving too deep into Jefferson's personal involvement in the church-state issue, it is essential to understand the basis of his religious faith. Three main factors influenced his religion – the Virginia religious culture, his family, and his education.

Born in 1743, Thomas Jefferson was raised in the Anglican colony of Virginia. For the entirety of his childhood and young adult years, Jefferson knew a Virginia where religion and state were essentially one. Anglican churches and clergy were paid by taxes, church attendance was mandated by law, and denial of the Christian God could lead to harsh punishments, not limited to imprisonment, loss of custody of children, or death.⁴⁴ It was not until Jefferson was in his thirties that Virginia religious laws began their drastic change towards the principles of religious freedom that he was so proud of. Despite these strict religious laws, the gentlemen of Virginia tended to be agnostic, while the men of lower standing were “imbued neither with theological prescience nor with intolerance.”⁴⁵

While the religious culture of Virginia no doubt played a role on Jefferson's faith, the influence his family made was much more personal. It was his parents who were

⁴⁴ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Religion in Early Virginia*, <http://www.history.org/almanack/life/religion/religionva.cfm> (accessed February 9, 2014). & Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, query 17, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://web.archive.org/web/20110221131421/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefVirg.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=17&division=div1>.

⁴⁵ Saul K. Padover, *Jefferson; A Great American's Life and Ideas* (New York: The New American Library, 1962), 116. & Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Religion*: “The Anglican gentry in Virginia long had a reputation for shallow faith and attendance at church born more of habit and a desire for social contact than piety or zeal.”

responsible for introducing him to the Anglican faith and encouraging him to be active in this faith. As was typical for the children of colonial Virginia, Jefferson was baptized into the Anglican Church as a baby. He attended church regularly throughout his life, his own prayer book in hand. This was a habit which was likely a result of his parents' teaching.⁴⁶ In Virginia the women were typically responsible for the upkeep of religious life in the family setting.⁴⁷ It can be surmised, then, that Jefferson's mother, Jane, was the one responsible for his religious education as a child, though it is impossible to know for sure. Jefferson wrote sparingly of his mother. All letters between the two were either destroyed in a fire or later destroyed by Jefferson.⁴⁸

The church played an integral role in certain major events of Jefferson's life. The funerals of the family members that had passed away during his life were presided over by the clergy, including those of his father and mother.⁴⁹ Jefferson's marriage to Martha Wayles Skelton was in the traditional Anglican fashion and their children were baptized into the Anglican faith as he had been as an infant.⁵⁰

Jefferson's education was probably the single most important role in the shaping of his faith. While his family and the Virginia society were there to plant the basis of his faith, Jefferson's mentors and the writings he was assigned to read were more influential in shaping his personal faith. The writings of Locke, Newton, and various other

⁴⁶ Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson; A Profile*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 244. & Padover, *Jefferson*: Jefferson's family is referred to as "God-fearing."

⁴⁷ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Religion*.

⁴⁸ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson; The Art of Power* (New York, Random House, 2012), 12. The destruction of the letters is assumed in that none presently remain. Why they were destroyed is unknown, though some historians attribute it to a possible estrangement between Jefferson and his mother.

⁴⁹ Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*, 244. & Meacham, *The Art of Power*, 12.

⁵⁰ Peterson: *Jefferson; A Profile*, 244. & Meacham, *The Art of Power*, 57.

philosophers of the Enlightenment are the most clearly noticeable in the evolution of Jefferson's religion.

His childhood education was put in the hands of two private tutors, both of whom were members of the clergy. His first tutor, Reverend William Douglass, concentrated Jefferson's studies in the areas of French language and classics. Despite his tutor's religious profession, Jefferson's later reflections about his teacher were only about the reverend's skills at teaching a language.⁵¹ After the death of his father, Reverend James Maury became Jefferson's new tutor. Maury schooled him in the subjects of history, literature, and ancient philosophy, as well as the importance of proficiency in Greek and Latin if one is to be a "reputable figure in divinity, medicine, or law."⁵² This knowledge of Greek and Latin would play a key role in the creation of his *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* many years later.⁵³

In 1760, at the age of seventeen, Jefferson began school at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. It was here that Jefferson met William Small, his admired mentor. Small was greatly influential to Jefferson and introduced him to a number of writers who shaped Jefferson's thinking and, in some cases, his religious views.⁵⁴ These writers included many philosophers of the English Enlightenment such as

⁵¹ Abigail Bilbrey, "William Douglas", Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., August 2010, <http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/william-douglas> (accessed January 30, 2014).

⁵² Quote by Maury in Meacham, *The Art of Power*, 14.

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson's *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, commonly referred to as *The Jefferson Bible* was compiled of four different languages, two of which were Latin and Greek. Though the extent to which Jefferson could use these languages can only be speculated at, his ability to have read the Gospels in their original language would have certainly shaped his understanding of their meaning.

⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., "William Small," *Monticello*, <http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/william-small> (accessed January 31, 2014). It is interesting to note that William Small was the only non-clergyman on staff at the College of William and Mary at this time.

Adam Smith, Sir Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Sir Isaac Newton.⁵⁵ Later in his life, Jefferson would proclaim Locke, Newton, and Bacon as the “greatest men the world had ever produced.”⁵⁶ In a letter to his nephew in 1787, Jefferson includes writings by John Locke in a list of suggested readings on religion.⁵⁷ In addition to the subject of philosophy, Small encouraged Jefferson’s intellectual development in science, math, and the principals of the Enlightenment.⁵⁸

Over the course of his life, Jefferson’s faith evolved. One can see this evolution in three stages of his life, the first being his youth, the second his years before his presidency, and the third his presidential and post-presidential years. Through these three stages, Jefferson moved from an indifferent Anglican to an innovative Deist. Jefferson passes through these stages as much as a result from his aforementioned influences as from his own mental maturation and changing understanding of the world.

As mentioned before, Jefferson’s introduction into the Anglican Church was an integral part of the traditional and legal upbringing of a Virginian child.⁵⁹ He attended church on a regular basis and participated in the prayers and responsive readings.⁶⁰ However, it is difficult to judge how much of his Anglican upbringing he took to heart at this stage in his life. Jefferson did not discuss the subject of religion in his writings and

⁵⁵ Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 18.

⁵⁶ Quotation by Jefferson with accompanying pictures in Meacham, *The Art of Power*, picture insert.

⁵⁷ Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0021> (accessed January 29, 2014).

⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., “William Small.”

⁵⁹ Meacham, *The Art of Power*, 123.

⁶⁰ Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*, 244.

letters until much later in his life, so his personal faith at this stage of his youth is largely a mystery. What can be assumed, though, is it was at this stage in his life that the existence of a god became a necessary and important feature of his religion. While Jefferson would question the divinity and miracles of Jesus later in his life, he would never deny the existence of a god. Therefore, it was likely in this first stage of his religious evolution that the existence of God became a concrete basis for his faith.

As Jefferson grew older, he began to take a more active approach to his personal faith. In letters to his friends and family members, Jefferson would, on occasion, include a list of books on the subject of religion that he felt were of great importance. These works included Locke's *Conduct of the Mind*, Hume's essays, works by Voltaire, and the writings of a number of classical philosophers.⁶¹ In some cases, as in his letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, Jefferson offered his advice about ways in which one should approach the subject of religion. It is possible to see in this letter that, while Jefferson admires the importance of religion, he had become cautious of its implications. He began the subject of religion with the implied understanding that religion is a subject that should be pursued only by those persons with a mature sense of reason. Reason, Jefferson instructed, should be used liberally while studying the subject of religion, for God must "more approve [of] the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear."⁶²

Jefferson did not restrict his religious opinions to personal letters. In 1779, Jefferson drafted a bill for the establishment of religious freedom in Virginia. While this

⁶¹ For two examples of these lists of religious books, see: Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787." & Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to Robert Skipwith, with a List of Books for a Private Library, 3 August 1771," *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0056> (accessed February 12, 2014).

⁶² Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787."

bill will be explored later in this chapter, the language Jefferson uses to introduce his main point lends much to the exploration of the evolution of his faith. Unlike in his later letter to his nephew, Jefferson did not use the conditional “if” when referring to the existence of God, but rather implies that there *is* a God who “hath created the mind free.”⁶³ Shortly after Jefferson drafted this bill he began work on his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this work, Jefferson included a query on religion in Virginia in which he praised reason and argued that no two states have established themselves under the exact same religion. In this work, Jefferson seems to not only question the reader, but himself as well. The use of rhetorical questions on the infallibility of state religion lends to the feeling of Jefferson’s own uncertainties.⁶⁴ In this middle stage, Jefferson moved away from his Anglican faith and closer to Deism.

In the final stage of Jefferson’s evolution of faith, during his presidential and post-presidential years, Jefferson showed himself to be unequivocally Deist. As he pondered over religious establishments, writing freely on the subject to his friends, Jefferson became ever more disenchanted with the state of Christianity. He believed people were blinded by church leaders, whom in one letter he refers to as “the real Anti-Christ.”⁶⁵ Jefferson never parted from his belief in a God, and though he appreciated Jesus as a moral prophet, reason made him hesitant about the existence of miracles. He believed that these miracles were distractions from the true doctrines of Jesus, which were:

⁶³ Thomas Jefferson, “82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082> (accessed February 13, 2014).

⁶⁴ Jefferson, *Notes on the state of Virginia*, query 17.

⁶⁵ Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*: 250.

1. That there is one only God, and He all perfect.
2. That there is a future state of rewards and punishments.
3. That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.⁶⁶

In order to fix this problem, Jefferson took it upon himself to edit the Gospels during his time in office. This first cut-and-pasted volume he entitled *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth extracted from the account of his life and doctrines as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*.⁶⁷ Later, after he had returned to Monticello and had retired from political service, Jefferson created a second and more complete version which he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.⁶⁸

The evolution of Jefferson's personal faith throughout his life greatly affected how he encountered the issues of church and state. Examining this evolution is important in that it gives a basis of understanding of why Jefferson felt it necessary to personally involve himself with these issues.

Jefferson's Dilemma: The Church-State Issue

Jefferson was not the only person of his time to ponder over theological issues or support religious freedom. What made him distinct, however, was his willingness to take action on his ideas and the successes that he thus accomplished. Jefferson could have

⁶⁶ Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803 as quoted in Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*: 249.

⁶⁷ Harry R. Rubenstein and Barbara Clark Smith, History of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English*, by Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2011): 27. The title continued with: *Being an abridgement of the New Testament for the use of the Indians unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 28. The title continued with: *Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English*.

easily been content with never going further than putting his ideas in writing to his family and friends, but instead he felt motivated to take action to put his ideals in place. Faced with the shifting political environment of the American Revolution, Jefferson must have realized his unique opportunity to put in place changes that might have otherwise taken generations.

As discussed in the earlier chapter on the Enlightenment and religion, a major disagreement among historians of this period was whether the Enlightenment sought to modify religion or destroy it.⁶⁹ Jefferson and, as will be seen later, Robespierre both were of a mind to modify organized religion, not destroy it. Jefferson sought to return religion, particularly Christianity, to a pure, original form that praised “liberty, science, & the freest expansions of the human mind.”⁷⁰ This quote by Jefferson characterizes Cassirer’s argument in his *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. “The strongest intellectual forces of the Enlightenment do not lie in its rejection of belief but rather in the new form of faith which it proclaims, and in the new form of religion which it embodies.”⁷¹ Paul Hazard would have considered Jefferson to be among the Anglican apologists who sought to “réhabiliter [la] vraie valeur” of religion and “rendrait confiance dans les vérités de la foi” to the Christians.⁷²

In the chapter on the Enlightenment and religion, Jonathan Israel’s theory of the

⁶⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951): 134-136.

⁷⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Moses Robinson, with Enclosure, 23 March 1801,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0362> (accessed February 18, 2014).

⁷¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 135.

⁷² Paul Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle; De Montesquieu à Lessing* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1963) : 87.

three factions of Enlightenment thinkers – conservatives, moderates, and radicals – was discussed.⁷³ Though Israel did not himself assign Jefferson to one of these three groups, he would have considered Jefferson to be among the moderates, separating him thus from the group of more radical “pantheistic” Enlightenment thinkers that Hazard did not distinguish in his writings. As a Deist, Jefferson found himself separated from the conservative group of Enlightenment thinkers who wished religion, particularly Christianity, to keep its influential and powerful place among governments. Jefferson’s dislike of the established clergy, however, did not push him as far as the radicals who sought to remove established religion entirely from society.⁷⁴

Jefferson realized early in his political career that modifying religion must go further than reconciling reason with scripture. As Israel explains in his book *Radical Enlightenment*, the authoritative hierarchy of religion had to be reexamined. To a degree, the Enlightenment “demolished [the] legitimation of...ecclesiastical authority.”⁷⁵ For Jefferson who saw the priesthood – the collective term he used for the clergy and other religious authority figures – as being all too often corrupt, this “demolition” provided an opportunity for the government to break ties with this priesthood.⁷⁶ Part of this corruption, he believed, was the priesthood’s dependence on the government. The use of public funds to support religious institutions and “state-enforced compulsion” to attend

⁷³ For a general overview of these three groups see: Siep Stuurman, “Pathway to the Enlightenment: From Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel; Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750 by Jonathan I. Israel,” *History Workshop Journal*, No. 54 (Autumn, 2002): 228.

⁷⁴ Ibid. & Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment; Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷⁵ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: vi.

⁷⁶ Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*: 250.

church services led to a sort of “spiritual tyranny.”⁷⁷ Separating the government from the church would not hurt religion, Jefferson thought, but rather help return it to its true merit, for “it did not speak well of the power of God...if He needed a human government to prop him up.”⁷⁸

The Enlightenment led to many questions about the role religion played in human life and to what extent humans were independent of religion. While many of these questions had merit in their own right, Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre both felt that two of these were the most important: 1) Does the basis of morality lie in religion and 2) Is freedom of conscience a basic right of all?⁷⁹ For Robespierre, the first of these questions was the most important, as will be explored in the next chapter. For Jefferson the question of the freedom of conscience was the most important.

Though it was not the most important issue for Jefferson, he explored the issue of the basis of morality in depth. With the Enlightenment, three different opinions on the basis of morality arose. While traditionally morality was thought to be a product of religion, professed by the prophets and writings of the different world religions, new ideas were emerging. A group of thinkers known as the “moral philosophers” – the English response to the French *philosophes* – pondered two new bases of morality: reason and nature.⁸⁰

Reason as a basis of morality was often promoted by those in the radical

⁷⁷ Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 123.

⁷⁸ Hazard, *La pensée européenne*: 87. Quote by Meacham in: Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 123.

⁷⁹ These questions are discussed by many if not most major Enlightenment historians and writers including Jonathan Israel, Paul Hazard, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Pierre Bayle.

⁸⁰ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity; The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 25.

Enlightenment.⁸¹ This idea insisted that morality came from the process of humans reasoning over what was best for society as a whole and for individuals. In this way, humans were solely responsible for morality, rather than the church or an all-powerful deity. In his book on Enlightenment thought, Hazard explains this concept of reasoned morality in the case of a stolen horse:

*D'autre part, la nature, étant raison, a établi entre toutes choses créées des rapports rationnels. Le bien est la conscience de ces rapports, l'obéissance logique à ces rapports ; le mal est l'ignorance de ces rapports, la désobéissance à ces rapports : au fond, le crime est toujours un faux jugement. Les logiciens n'hésitent pas à tirer de ce principe des conséquences extrêmes : au sujet de ce cheval, n'ayant pas compris que le cheval était la propriété d'un autre homme. Il lui suffisait de mieux comprendre pour ne pas voler.*⁸²

Alternatively, other Enlightenment thinkers believed in a natural basis of morality. This idea hypothesized that morality was an ingrained feature of all human beings. This ingrained morality was termed the “moral sense” by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, in his essay *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. This “moral sense” was the ability to feel right and wrong and was embedded in human nature.⁸³ David Hume agreed with this idea of a “moral sense” in his book *A Treatise of Human Nature* in two sections titled “Moral Distinctions Not Derived from Reason” and “Moral Distinctions Derived from a Moral Sense.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind; Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010): 156.

⁸² Hazard, *La pensée européenne*: 165.

⁸³ Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity*: 27.

⁸⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, accessed February 21, 2014, The Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm>.

Though Jefferson agreed more with the idea of a “moral sense” rather than that of reasoned morality, he could not completely let go of the idea that religion played an essential role in the development of morality in humans. In a letter to James Fishback in 1809 he pointed out that “all religions...forbid us to murder, steal, plunder, or bear false witness.”⁸⁵ Jefferson combined the ideas of a natural basis and a religious basis of morality, refuting the idea that Christianity or any one religion was responsible for morality, but rather that the “Creator” placed in each person a sense of morality. In a later letter, Jefferson explained this idea to Thomas Law:

The creator would indeed have been a bungling artist had he intended man for a social animal without planting in him social dispositions. It is true they are not planted in every man... but it is false reasoning which converts exceptions into the general rule. Some men are born without the organs of sight, or of hearing, or without hands; yet it would be wrong to say that man is born without these faculties...⁸⁶

Jefferson’s recognition of religion’s helpful role in the development of morality in society brought up issues of state involvement with religion. If religion aided and expanded morality in society, should not a government require adherence to a religion? As will be seen later, this was a question that Robespierre would face during the French Revolution.

In contrast to Robespierre, Jefferson’s answer to the government’s involvement in religion, in terms of morality, was a resounding “no.” Religion, he believed, was a

⁸⁵ Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to James Fishback (Final State), 27 September 1809,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-01-02-0437-0003> (accessed February 21, 2014).

⁸⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0307> (accessed February 21, 2014). I have modernized the capitalization and punctuation in this quote.

strictly private matter between individuals and their “maker.”⁸⁷ Though he believed that religion was beneficial in the development of morality, Jefferson did not think it to be the government’s place to require any religion of its citizens.⁸⁸ As he wrote in his letter to Fishback, government should take into consideration those “moral precepts” that all religions agree on, but that for the government to ally itself with one religion over the other would only end in harming morality.⁸⁹

The basis of morality was an important issue for Jefferson and one that appears extensively in his few writings on religion. However, it was the Enlightenment’s questioning of the freedom of conscience that interested him the most. Unlike Robespierre, who concentrated most of his church-state ideas on morality, Jefferson worked hardest on and was proudest of his efforts on establishing freedom of conscience for all, particularly in the terms of religion. It was this issue, brought to the forefront by the Enlightenment, which Jefferson personally took on in both the field of politics and in his private life.

As was discussed in the earlier chapter on the Enlightenment and religion, the ideas of freedom of conscience, particularly regarding religion, gained the most support during this period of scientific discovery and social questioning. Authoritative hierarchies were breaking down as humans began to examine their lives with a reasoned mind.⁹⁰ Among these hierarchies was Jefferson’s aforementioned “priesthood.”⁹¹ For

⁸⁷ Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Richard Rush, 31 May 1813,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-06-02-0155> (accessed February 21, 2014).

⁸⁸ Rubenstein & Smith, “History of the Jefferson Bible”: 15-17.

⁸⁹ Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to James Fishback, 27 September 1809.” & Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson; A Profile*: 259.

⁹⁰ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: vi.

centuries, particularly among the Christians, the common man had relied on religious authorities to tell him how to think and act. The Enlightenment openly challenged this idea with the argument that man was a reasoned being and could think for himself. Immanuel Kant most clearly expounded this idea in his famous words: *sapere aude!* The motto of the Enlightenment, Kant explained, was to “have the courage to use your own understanding.”⁹² The definition of immaturity was to not have the ability “to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”⁹³

Jefferson praised these Enlightenment ideas. Reason was man’s greatest tool and should be used as much in the area of religion as in every other aspect of life. “Question with boldness even the existence of a god,” Jefferson instructed his nephew, “because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”⁹⁴

The right to freedom of conscience was more than just a political issue for Jefferson. It affected Jefferson personally throughout his life. Laws mandated by the colony of Virginia forced his attendance at Anglican services as a young man, but it was not until revolution began to spread through the colonies that Jefferson encountered first-hand the need for religious freedom. In the fall of 1776, religious dissenters across Virginia began petitioning for religious freedom while Jefferson sat in the Virginia House of Delegates. Baptist ministers were said to have been preaching from jail and the many Deist Virginians were beginning to tire of the strict Anglican laws set in place at an

⁹¹ Peterson, *Jefferson; A Profile*: 250.

⁹² Quoted in: Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 163.

⁹³ Quoted in: Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 18.

⁹⁴ Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787.”

earlier time.⁹⁵ Opinions on the issue were not one-sided, however, and Jefferson was faced with the task of establishing freedom of religion against the opposition of those “honest...but zealous churchmen” who wished the established church to remain untouched.⁹⁶ It would take ten years before the bill establishing religious freedom passed in Virginia.⁹⁷

Jefferson’s greatest personal challenge with freedom of conscience came later in his life during the time that he was running for president of the still-new United States of America. With the recent success of the Statute of Religious Freedom in Virginia, Jefferson entered into the election with an open mind. It did not take long, however, for a storm of attacks against his religion to begin. William Lin, a Dutch Reformed minister from New York, was the leader of these attacks. In his pamphlet *Serious Considerations on the Election of a President* he sought to prove that Jefferson was a “true infidel” and “a deadly foe to His name and His cause.”⁹⁸ Lin was not the only person who believed Jefferson’s religious views were reason enough not to elect him as president. Clergymen seemed to mobilize against him, particularly in New England.⁹⁹

Though Jefferson had succeeded in providing freedom of religion in his own state and though the Bill of Rights had followed shortly after to provide religious freedom to all American citizens, Jefferson saw firsthand in the election of 1800 that the fight for

⁹⁵ Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 123. & Padover, *Jefferson; A Great American’s Life and Ideas*: 116.

⁹⁶ Jefferson quoted in Meacham, *The Art of Power*: 123-124.

⁹⁷ Rubenstein & Smith, “History of the Jefferson Bible”: 15.

⁹⁸ Padover, *Jefferson; A Great American’s Life and Ideas*: 116-117. Quotations for William Lin’s pamphlet are taken from Padover.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 116.

freedom of conscience was not yet over. It must have been no small victory for Jefferson that even after such vicious religious attacks he was elected President.

This election period is often overlooked when considering Jefferson's efforts on religious freedom due to the fact that no legislation came about specifically in response to these attacks. However, it is important to note that these attacks did not cause Jefferson to give up on the issue. Though he does not pursue any more public policies specifically on this issue, in private writings Jefferson does not let the issue lie.¹⁰⁰

The role the government should play in regard to freedom of conscience was very clear-cut for Jefferson. Mainly, government should content itself with staying out of the issue of religion entirely. "I have considered [religion] as a matter between every man and his maker, in which no other, and far less the public, [have] a right to intermeddle," he wrote to Richard Rush in the years after his presidency.¹⁰¹ For Jefferson, "[t]he legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others." Thus, the government should have no power in religion because, as he wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."¹⁰²

Furthering his position that the government should not involve itself with religion, Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association expressing his desire for a separation of church and state. Written in 1802 during his presidency, Jefferson wrote that "building a wall of separation between Church and State" would help to "restore to

¹⁰⁰ For example, see: Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to Richard Rush, 31 May 1813."

¹⁰¹ Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to Richard Rush, 31 May 1813." Punctuation in quote has been modernized.

¹⁰² Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, query 17.

man all his natural rights....”¹⁰³ It was from this letter that the phrase “separation of church and state” was adopted into American religious ideology.

While he was adamant that government should avoid involvement in religion, Jefferson was in favor of government protection of freedom of conscience. When Jefferson read through a draft of the Constitution proposed for adoption by the Constitutional Convention, he was disgruntled to find that it lacked a protection of rights, including that of religious freedom. “I will now add what I do not like,” Jefferson wrote in a letter to Madison about the proposed Constitution, “First the omission of a bill of rights providing clearly and without the aid of sophisms for freedom of religion....”¹⁰⁴ This omission, interestingly, was not enough to keep Jefferson from supporting the adoption of the Constitution. Despite the importance Jefferson held for freedom of conscience, he was content to wait a while longer for its legal protection. In a letter written five months after his words to Madison, Jefferson sagely wrote, “we must be contented to travel on towards perfection, step by step.”¹⁰⁵

Implementation of Church-State Ideas

Unlike many of the Enlightenment thinkers whom he admired and respected, Jefferson got personally involved in politics, first in the colony and later state of Virginia,

¹⁰³ Thomas Jefferson, “V. To the Danbury Baptist Association, 1 January 1802,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-36-02-0152-0006> (accessed February 27, 2014). Punctuation has been modernized.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Jefferson, “To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 20 December 1787,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0210> (accessed February 26, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Moustier, 17 May 1788,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-13-02-0095> (accessed February 26, 2014).

then as a diplomat in France, as Secretary of State, Vice President, and finally as President of the United States. Ambitious and courageous, Jefferson joined the political world not for fame or recognition, but in the honest hope that he could better the plight of his fellow human beings. As Jon Meacham so aptly put, “For Jefferson, politics was not a dispiriting distraction but an undertaking that made everything else possible.”¹⁰⁶

During his time in the political arena, Jefferson took it upon himself to reform the church-state issues that he recognized as problematic. He sought to separate the government from religion and, more importantly, secure religious freedom for all citizens. Jefferson implemented these goals in a number of ways.

The first success for Jefferson in the area of religious freedom was the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom. Jefferson himself drafted the bill in 1779 after a wave of “cries for religious liberty” passed through Virginia. The bill took several years to become law, but finally in 1786 while Jefferson was living in France, the state of Virginia adopted religious freedom.¹⁰⁷

Interestingly, while promoting religious freedom, the bill acknowledged the existence of the Christian God, stating:

Well aware...that Almighty God hath created the mind free,
...all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or
burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget
habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from
the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord
both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by
coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to
do...¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Meacham, *The Art of Power*: xxiii.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: 123-124.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779.”

Despite its Christian implications, the Virginia Statue of Religious did as its author intended by declaring freedom of religion a “natural right.”¹⁰⁹ This achievement of protecting freedom of conscience in his home state was one of Jefferson’s proudest accomplishments. The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom was one of the three that he has listed on his gravestone, signifying its real importance Jefferson.

The second success of Jefferson’s church-state goals was the adoption of the Bill of Rights as amendments to the United States Constitution. Though Jefferson was not directly responsible for the creation of a bill of rights, he strongly pushed for its addition. Though away in France at the time of their proposal, Jefferson was not silent on the issue of adopting the Bill of Rights. He wrote many letters to his political colleagues debating the issue back in the United States. “...A bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on Earth, general or particular...,” he wrote to his friend James Madison.¹¹⁰ Naturally, one of the rights Jefferson urged for was religious freedom.¹¹¹ Shortly before his return to the United States, Jefferson’s efforts took shape as the Bill of Rights was accepted as the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Jefferson was enthusiastic.¹¹²

Even outside of political life, Jefferson did not halt in his determination to see his church-state ideas implemented. While he wrote little about his own faith, Jefferson was not silent on church-state issues. In 1787 Jefferson published his *Notes on the State of*

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in: Padover, *Jefferson; A Great American’s Life and Ideas*: 73.

¹¹¹ Jefferson, “To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 20 December 1787.”

¹¹² Padover, *Jefferson; A Great American’s Life and Ideas*: 74.

Virginia, in which he included a section on the state of religion in his state. Though it was not a bill to be passed or a pamphlet specifically meant to influence to the politics of its readers, Jefferson used this work as an opportunity to explain his own philosophical and political ideas on the state and religion. It is in this work that one finds Jefferson's aforementioned quote that religious differences do no harm to citizens of a state which promotes religious freedom.¹¹³

In addition to *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson broached the topic of church-state issues in letters to his friends and family. As mentioned, Jefferson's letters to Madison helped to form the Bill of Rights, including the adoption of Religious Freedom in the first amendment.¹¹⁴

Jefferson used both his personal and political time to ensure that his fellow citizens could enjoy the benefits of a society which adopted the religious ideas that the Enlightenment had brought forward. For Jefferson, the most important of these was freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state.

Conclusion – Did It Last?

Thomas Jefferson was an idealistic and ambitious man. Inspired by the Enlightenment's restructuring of religious thought, Jefferson was eager to implement these new ideas in the government of the colony, state, and country he so loved. Through hard work and dedication he succeeded in seeing through a number of religious reforms.

But did Jefferson's efforts last? Recalling the introductory story of the Texas

¹¹³ Jefferson, *Notes on the state of Virginia*, query 17.

¹¹⁴ Jefferson, "To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 20 December 1787."

Board of Education, Jefferson's fight is far from over. Jefferson has become one of the most controversial characters in American history in regard to religion. As a founding father of the United States of America, he is readily adopted by all sides in the religious arguments brewing in today's politics. For some he is the great defender of religious freedom, promoting a nation in which all people can live peacefully without threat to their faith. For others, he is the epitome of American Christianity, promoting religious toleration while holding firmly to an "Almighty God."¹¹⁵ And for a few, such as the Texas Board of Education, he is an enemy to religion, calling for separation of church and state rather than a Christian nation.

Regardless of one's opinion on the character of Jefferson's efforts, he is one of, if not the most influential character in American history in the area of religion and the state. His efforts to provide religious freedom for all citizens and the creation of the idea of a separation of church and state has shaped American religious ideology throughout its history.

¹¹⁵ See: Jefferson, "82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779."

CHAPTER THREE

Maximilien Robespierre: Religion and the State

*Père de l'univers, suprême intelligence,
bienfaiteur ignoré des aveugles mortels.
Tu révélas ton être à la reconnaissance,
qui seule éleva tes autels.*

*Tout émane de toi, grande et première cause,
tout s'épure aux rayons de ta divinité;
sur ton culte immortel la morale repose,
et sur les mœurs la Liberté.*

*Dieu puissant! Elle seule a vengé ton injure,
de ton culte elle-même instruisant des mortels,
levant le voile épais qui couvrait la nature,
elle vint absoudre tes autels.*

*De la haine des rois anime la Patrie,
chasse les vains désirs, l'injuste orgueil des rangs,
le luxe corrompateur, la basse flatterie,
plus fatale que les tyrans. [sic]¹¹⁶*

Four thousand miles across the Atlantic from Jefferson's Monticello, Maximilien Robespierre stood under the radiant "*l'astre du jour*" as the notes of the "Hymne à l'Être Suprême" rang out across the Tuileries. Thousands of voices resonated together as the poetry of Théodor Désourges entwined with the melody of François-Joseph Gossec.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Constant Pierre, "Hymne à l'Être Suprême," *Musique de fêtes et cérémonies de la révolution française; œuvres de Gossec, Cherubini, Lesueur, Méhul, Catel, etc., recueillies et transcrites par Constant Pierre* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1899), 232-239. Selected verses are those sung by the soloist.

¹¹⁷ Simon Schama, *Citizens; A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 834.

Here in the gardens of the Tuileries, filled with what Robespierre claimed to be “the most interesting part of humanity,” the voices rang out in praise of the Supreme Being.¹¹⁸

In great contrast to Thomas Jefferson’s efforts of separating religion from the state, Robespierre embraced the creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being as an essential part of the new French Republic. As the words of the hymn proclaimed, it was “sur [ce] culte immortel” in which morality rested.¹¹⁹

Personal Faith

Like Jefferson, Robespierre’s personal involvement with church-state issues was greatly influenced by his own personal faith, or lack thereof. Thus, it is important to examine what influenced Robespierre’s faith. These influences can be comprised into three main groups – the religious culture of France, his family and peers, and finally his education.

Maximilien Robespierre was born into a France that, in contrast to Jefferson’s Protestant Virginia, was strictly Catholic. Fifteen years Jefferson’s junior, Robespierre was born in the city of Arras in northern France. Despite its close ties with the Protestant Netherlands as a border city, Arras was unequivocally Catholic.¹²⁰ Within the city one could find a cathedral, an abbey, eleven parish churches, more than twenty monasteries and convents, and numerous chapels. The presence of these many religious buildings

¹¹⁸ Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity; Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006), 326.

¹¹⁹ Constant Pierre, "Hymne à l'Être Suprême," *Musique de fêtes et cérémonies de la révolution française*, 232-239.

¹²⁰ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 179.

gave Arras the nickname “the city of a hundred steeples.”¹²¹

Religion was important to social culture across France. With Catholicism as the official state religion, the Catholic Church held an immense amount of power in France. Members of society were expected to act in a Christian, specifically Catholic, manner. The Church controlled conduct through a set of spiritual and moral codes found in religious texts, and any French man or woman who did not wish religious or societal retribution was expected to follow these codes. Ignoring them could lead to exclusion from society or other serious penalties.¹²²

Robespierre’s entrance to the world was notably outside of the Church’s proscribed conduct. Having been conceived out of wedlock, he was saved from illegitimacy penalties by the hasty marriage of his mother and father.¹²³ The oldest of four surviving children, Robespierre was plunged into an unstable world at an early age. With the death of his mother at age six and abandonment by his father at age fourteen, he was largely raised by his maternal grandparents.¹²⁴

The extent to which Robespierre was raised in a religious environment before the start of his schooling is merely guesswork. Robespierre wrote sparingly of his family and Charlotte, his sister and late-life biographer, mentioned only their existence in her memoirs.¹²⁵ As was custom for French children, Robespierre was baptized into the

¹²¹ Ibid., 17.

¹²² Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 19.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁵ Charlotte Robespierre, *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères*, 2nd Ed. (Paris: Au Dépôt Central, 1835), 46.

Catholic Church as an infant. Despite little evidence of Robespierre's attendance at mass during his childhood years, the historian J.M. Thompson notes in his biography on Robespierre that he entered school a conventional Catholic.¹²⁶

As with Jefferson, education was the most important factor in shaping Robespierre's religious views. Robespierre began formal schooling at the age of eight years old, having already learned to read and write. His first foray into the educational world was at the local Collège d'Arras. The school had strong religious ties. It was governed by a committee whose membership included the bishop of Arras. In addition, all of the teachers at the Collège d'Arras were priests.¹²⁷ Whether or not the first seven years of Robespierre's life had been structured by religion, he would not have been able to escape Catholicism at such a school.

Robespierre spent three years at the Collège d'Arras before continuing his education in Paris. A friend of his aunts, the abbot of Saint-Vaast, was impressed by the young boy's enthusiasm to learn and gave to Robespierre one of the scholarships at his disposal to the Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris.¹²⁸ Like the Collège d'Arras, the Collège Louis-le-Grand was a stronghold of Catholic influence. Thompson described the Collège in the following words:

Side by side with the classical and philosophical teaching at Louis-le-Grand, and affecting it at every turn, was the Catholic system, with its daily Offices and Mass, compulsory monthly Confession, Communion (at least) at all the great Festivals, and the Retreats that opened every

¹²⁶ J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), 11.

¹²⁷ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 22.

¹²⁸ Robespierre, *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères*, 49. The abbot of Saint-Vaast also appears in English with the spelling "Saint-Waast."

Academic year.¹²⁹

Originally under control of the Jesuit order, the Collège Louis-le-Grand changed hands shortly before Robespierre's arrival. With the expulsion of the Jesuits from educational institutions across France, Louis-le-Grand found itself under the control of the University of Paris.¹³⁰ The change in leadership of the Collège did not rid the school of its Catholic influence. Robespierre was required to attend Mass, confess, and participate in prayers and hymn singing.¹³¹ Ruth Scurr describes in her own biography of Robespierre his daily schedule, including the many religious elements:

During his school days, Robespierre rose from his dormitory bed ... at 5:30 a.m., attended prayers at 6:00 a.m., Scripture study at 6:15 a.m., and Mass at 10:30 a.m. A long day of lessons was followed by more prayers and devotional readings at 8:45 p.m., after which the boys undressed for bed while listening to a reading from the life of the saint whose feast occurred the following day.¹³²

Well-trained in the ceremonial side of Catholicism, he was never very interested in the dogmatic side. Robespierre was a conventional Catholic who was not keen to ponder his own faith as Jefferson did.¹³³ As he grew older, Robespierre became more and more a skeptic in regard to religion. According to the abbé Proyart, who taught at the Collège Louis-le-Grand during Robespierre's time there, Robespierre often refused in whatever ways he could to participate in the religious ceremonies. During recitation of prayers and hymns he would stay silent and during sermons "it was easy to see that his

¹²⁹ Thompson, *Robespierre*, 11.

¹³⁰ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 23-24.

¹³¹ Thompson, *Robespierre*, 11.

¹³² Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 26.

¹³³ Thompson, *Robespierre* : 12.

thoughts and interests were far away from the God he was asked to adore.”¹³⁴ The abbé was not alone in his observations of the student’s lack of devotion. In a speech to the Jacobins in 1793, Robespierre himself announced, “J’ai été, dès collège, un assez mauvais catholique.”¹³⁵

Robespierre spent the rest of his educational career at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, including his training in the vocation of law. When he graduated from the school at the age of twenty-three it is likely that he had already come across writings of Rousseau. Though he did not praise Rousseau as publicly as Jefferson had praised Smith, Bacon, Locke, and Newton, Robespierre found in Rousseau a basis for his ideas on the Enlightenment.¹³⁶ As will be seen later, Rousseau’s influence on Robespierre’s philosophy did not fall short of influencing how Robespierre viewed the relationship between religion and the state during the French Revolution.

As was explored in the previous chapter, Jefferson’s faith evolved throughout his life from a state of indifference to innovative Deism. Robespierre also saw a series of changes, but rather than in his faith, the evolution occurred with his relationship with religion.

Robespierre certainly believed in some sort of higher being, no doubt a holdover from the aforementioned influences on his religious life. However, he clearly lacked any sort of personal conviction.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, this lack of faith did not mean that he did

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre, avec une notice historique, des notes et des commentaires, par Laponneraye; précédées de considérations générales, par Armand Carrel* (Paris : Chez l’éditeur, 1840) : 479. Quoted from speech given by Robespierre to the Jacobin club on November 21, 1793 (1^{er} frimaire an I).

¹³⁶ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 24-26.

¹³⁷ Thompson, *Robespierre*, 12.

not view religion to be important. On the contrary, as Robespierre grew older, he grew more and more convinced that religion was absolutely essential to a stable, moral society. The evolution of Robespierre's perceived importance of religion can be seen in three main stages, starting with his childhood and school years, moving into his professional years and the beginning of the French Revolution, and finally concluding with his years during the Terror.

Robespierre's relationship with the church began as one similar to the typical relationship between a child and parent. In Catholic France, religion was simply a part of life and something that should be obeyed to avoid punishment and secure favor. Just as a child begins to naturally rebel against his or her parents upon reaching puberty, Robespierre seemed to do the same with religion. As abbé Proyard noted, Robespierre began more and more to go against the religious conduct expected of him, standing silent during hymns and eventually refusing to participate in the taking of communion.¹³⁸

As Robespierre grew older his rebellious indifference to religion began to transform into anger. During his time working as a lawyer after leaving the Collège Louis-le-Grand, Robespierre found that he preferred to work with the poor and oppressed.¹³⁹ This work seemed to have awakened in him a sense of resentment against religion as he often worked to represent those who were exploited by the Church. On occasion, Robespierre found religious figures as his literal opposition in court. For example, during a trial in 1784, he represented a young girl who had unjustly been

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 41.

accused by a monk of stealing a large sum of money.¹⁴⁰ Five years later, just weeks before the fall of the Bastille, Robespierre called out the clergy in a courageous outburst.

The clergy should be reminded of the principles of the Early Church. ... All that is necessary [to relieve the poor] is that the bishops and dignitaries of the church should renounce that luxury which is an offence to Christian humility; that they should give up their coaches, and give up their horses; if need be, that they should sell a quarter of the property of the church, and give to the poor.¹⁴¹

As the French Revolution began to grow in fervor, Robespierre's dislike of religion increased. On a visit to his hometown of Arras, he was shocked to see that clerics were forming a dangerous opposition to the revolution that he so cherished. Writing to a friend, Robespierre again called out the clergy, this time labelling them despots and counterrevolutionaries.

Every time an aristocratic priest makes a convert he makes a new enemy of the Revolution; since those ignorant people he leads astray are incapable of distinguishing religious from national interest, and, in appearing to defend religious opinions, [the priests] actually preach despotism and counterrevolution.¹⁴²

In the final stage of the evolution of Robespierre's relationship with religion, he seemed to make a sudden movement in the opposite direction. As some militants embraced a policy of dechristianization which began to plague France, Robespierre reconsidered the issue. During the same trip to Arras that had led him to write the heated words seen above, Robespierre was struck by the strength of religion's social power.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Charles F. Warwick, *Robespierre and the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs & Company, 1909), 57.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Thompson, *Robespierre*, 50-51. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by Robespierre, if not in French, are quoted in the translated form that appears in the cited work.

¹⁴² Quoted in Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 179.

¹⁴³ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 180.

As dechristianization spread throughout France, Robespierre came to recognize that his anger stemmed not from religion, but from the clergy and the Catholic establishment.

With this reexamination, Robespierre began theorizing ways in which religion might be used as a tool for the Revolution. Helped along by other revolutionaries who questioned acts of dechristianization, the idea of the *Fête de l'Être Suprême* began to take shape. The idea was to use religion's social power as a strong moral basis and national unifier, something in stark contrast to the "indiscriminate destruction characteristic of the extreme phase of the Terror."¹⁴⁴

Though there is little evidence that Robespierre's personal faith evolved throughout his life as was the case with Jefferson, Robespierre's relationship with religion evolved rapidly during his short life. It was this relationship with religion that proved most influential in his personal involvement in the issues of church and state.

Robespierre's Predicament: Dechristianization

It is peculiar that Robespierre, who had little personal faith, played such an important role in fighting against atheism during the French Revolution. After exploring his religious background, it would seem more fitting that Robespierre would be content at the destruction of religion in France. Instead, he was appalled to at the measures taken by the dechristianizers. Though greatly concerned at the divisions religion was causing amongst the French people, with devout Catholics tending to side with the counterrevolutionaries, Robespierre was confident that the destruction of religion was not the solution to the problem. Instead, he believed that what the Revolution needed to

¹⁴⁴ Schama, *Citizens*, 829.

thrive was a unified religion that all French people, young and old, men and women, could rally around.

The Enlightenment played a major role in Robespierre's reasoning and ideas about religion. As the French Revolution continued to grow in intensity, France began to witness first-hand the major conflicts between Enlightenment ideas and religion. Did the new ideas of the Enlightenment mean that religion be abandoned, or simply modified?¹⁴⁵ As was the case with Jefferson, Robespierre was an advocate of modifying religion, not destroying it. Though both revolutionaries had a similar goal, Robespierre's reasoning behind the need for modification differed greatly from Jefferson's. While Jefferson wished to modify Christianity in particular to better fit it to Enlightenment ideas, Robespierre was more concerned with modifying religion into a tool to be used for the good of the Revolution and of French society. By modifying religion so that it would fall more in line with an "ideal" French society, Robespierre believed he was working for Rousseau's "*l'intérêt general*." By removing the clergy from their place of privilege and reverence, Robespierre and those revolutionaries who followed him believed that they were "stripping away what was superfluous and corrupt."¹⁴⁶

Of the three factions of religious Enlightenment thinkers – conservatives, moderates, and radicals – Robespierre fell within the radical group.¹⁴⁷ He earned his place among the radicals with religious ideas verging on pantheism that separated him sharply from Jefferson's more modest, deistic approach to religion.¹⁴⁸ This pantheistic

¹⁴⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*: 134-136.

¹⁴⁶ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: 717.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.: 272.

¹⁴⁸ Stuurman, "Pathway to the Enlightenment: From Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel": 228.

approach can most clearly be seen in his efforts to create a Cult of the Supreme Being, in which all things were unified under the *l'Être-Suprême*. As Robespierre explained to the National Convention months before the grand Festival of the Supreme Being,

Le véritable prêtre de l'Être-Suprême, c'est la nature; son temple, l'univers; son culte, la vertu; ses fêtes, la joie d'un grand peuple rassemblé sous ses yeux pour resserrer les doux nœuds de la fraternité universelle, et pour lui présenter l'hommage des cœurs sensibles et purs.¹⁴⁹

Reflecting the ideas of the radical Enlightenment, it is not surprising that Robespierre's actions towards modifying religion diverged from the moderate Jefferson.

In order for religion to thrive in the new society formed by the Revolution, Robespierre recognized the need to revitalize the public image of religion, including the traditional religious hierarchy. This was easier said than done, for as Paul Hazard points out, Christianity was fundamentally linked with European civilization.¹⁵⁰ The Enlightenment had begun the process of demolishing ecclesiastical authority, but now it was the job of the revolutionaries, like Robespierre, to complete the break from traditional Catholic authority.¹⁵¹ While Jefferson had used the decline of religious authority to begin separating the government from religion, Robespierre instead used it to replace traditional religious authority with a more regulated, state-controlled religious system. As he was condemning the Catholic priests as being “jaloux, capricieux, avide, cruel, [et] implacable,” Robespierre was creating a new priesthood.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 632. Quoted from Robespierre's speech to the National Convention on May 7, 1794 (18 floréal an II).

¹⁵⁰ Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle*: 51.

¹⁵¹ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*: vi.

¹⁵² Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 632. Quoted from Robespierre's speech to the National Convention on May 7, 1794 (18 floréal an II).

As discussed in the chapter on the Enlightenment and religion, the Enlightenment called into question the roles religion played in society and the extent to which humans lived independent from religion. Just as with Jefferson, Robespierre felt that two particular questions were most important: 1) Does the basis of morality lie in religion and 2) Is freedom of conscience a basic right of all?¹⁵³ For Jefferson, the question of the freedom of conscience was most important. However, Robespierre was more concerned with the question of morality.

Enlightenment thinkers often questioned whether morality derived from nature or from reason. Should it derive from nature, as Hume argued in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, then morality must be naturally embedded in humans.¹⁵⁴ A person's sense of right and wrong does not come from reasoned thinking, but rather an innate sense, an intuition.¹⁵⁵ In contrast, should morality derive itself from reason, then a person must reason out which actions and ideas are right and which are wrong. Hazard explains this hypothesis in his work on European thought in the eighteenth century: "La raison est la grande loi du monde, l'Être suprême lui-même est soumis à la Vérité qui, dans l'ordre théorique, reste le fondement de la moralité."¹⁵⁶

Robespierre tended to mix the two ideas of morality. This was due in part from the influence Rousseau's writings played on his philosophy.¹⁵⁷ Rousseau insisted that

¹⁵³ As mentioned in the chapter on Jefferson, these questions are discussed by many if not most major Enlightenment historians and writers including Jonathan Israel, Paul Hazard, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Pierre Bayle.

¹⁵⁵ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

¹⁵⁶ Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle*: 165.

¹⁵⁷ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 25.

“mankind is naturally good, but corrupted by society.”¹⁵⁸ In this way, mankind is born with a sense of morality, but that morality can be shaped and modified by reasoned arguments.¹⁵⁹ This understanding of morality scared Robespierre. He saw in the influence that the clergy had over the French people something detrimental to French society. “Les prêtres sont à la morale ce que les charlatans sont à la médecine,” he once proclaimed in a speech to the National Convention, for which he received much applause.¹⁶⁰

Robespierre’s belief that morality could be shaped by experience led him to consider the need for a “moral regeneration of the people.”¹⁶¹ According to Robespierre, “le fondement unique de la société civile, c’est la morale.”¹⁶² The Revolution must rejuvenate morality if the new French society was to succeed, for “immoralité est la base du despotisme.”¹⁶³

Unlike Jefferson, Robespierre did not hesitate to involve the state with issues of morality. On the contrary, Robespierre felt that the state’s involvement was essential, particularly during the Revolution when unification of the people seemed crucial for its success. For this reason, Robespierre was particularly irritated with the efforts of some revolutionaries to dechristianize France and the emergence of the Cult of Reason.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.: 24.

¹⁵⁹ Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 480.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.: 632.

¹⁶¹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 329.

¹⁶² Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 612.

¹⁶³ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 329. and Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 614.

¹⁶⁴ George Rudé, ed., *Robespierre; Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967): 68.

Such atheistic measures were contrary to the need for a revitalized morality.¹⁶⁵

Robespierre often spoke out against atheism in his speeches.¹⁶⁶ With no religion and no afterlife for people to strive towards, Robespierre was worried the French society would fall into disarray. Instead of promoting atheism, the state must instead modify religion so that it could coexist peacefully with the Revolution and French Republic, even if a god did not exist. "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer," Robespierre exclaimed, quoting Voltaire.¹⁶⁷

How to do this was a question that plagued Robespierre and a few of his revolutionary allies. Eventually, the idea of the Cult of the Supreme Being was devised. Discussed in greater detail later, this new religion allowed for the praise of revolutionary concepts, such as reason and republicanism, while keeping the idea of accountability and an afterlife. In regard to the role the state should play in morality, Robespierre believed, "La fonction du gouvernement est de diriger les forces morales et physiques de la nation vers le but de son institution."¹⁶⁸

Though the basis of morality was the most important issue for Robespierre, it was not the only one he pondered during the revolution. Like Jefferson, he also was also interested in whether freedom of conscience, particularly religious freedom, was a basic right of man. Having grown up in a Catholic-controlled France, the concept of pure religious freedom was somewhat of a foreign concept to Robespierre, but one that

¹⁶⁵ Schama, *Citizens*: 778.

¹⁶⁶ Julien Tiersot, *Les fêtes et les chants de la révolution française* (Paris: Hachette et cie, 1908): 123.

¹⁶⁷ Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 479.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.: 512. Quoted from Robespierre's speech to the National Convention on December 25, 1793, entitled "Rapport fait par Robespierre au nom du Comité de Salut Public sur les Principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire."

interested him.

Until the Revolution, Robespierre did not consider the implications of religious freedom, as Jefferson had. Though he had not particularly enjoyed the religious ceremonies he was expected to participate in as a schoolboy, his religious obligations had never caused him any personal strife. He was a baptized, conventional Catholic, and therefore fell within the mainstream of French society. However, with the breakdown of religious authority as the Revolution spread across France, Robespierre began considering the implications of religious freedom.

Robespierre's first real work with the issues of freedom of conscience came in the year 1789 when the National Assembly, of which he was a member, drafted the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*.¹⁶⁹ The creation of the French *Déclaration des droits* was inspired, without doubt, from the bills of rights that were appearing among the state constitutions in the United States of America. Although many articles of the *Déclaration des droits* seem to come directly from American influence, Scurr points out that, as a whole, it differed in significant ways from the adopted American Bill of Rights in the Constitution. The French version was more abstract and, naturally, catered to France's current circumstances.¹⁷⁰

In article ten of the *Déclaration des droits*, the document stated that, "No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law."¹⁷¹ Unlike the

¹⁶⁹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 101-103.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.: 101.

¹⁷¹ "Declaration of the Rights of Man – 1789," *The Avalon Project*, August 26, 1789, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp (accessed March 27, 2014).

Bill of Rights of the United States, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” the language of article ten of the *Déclaration des droits* dealt more with freedom of conscience, than action.¹⁷² Though Robespierre did not play a prominent role in the debates on the *Déclaration des droits*, he did not sit idly on the sidelines. In fact, “he championed freedom of conscience when members of the clergy tried to limit provisions for religious freedom in the new Declarations of Rights.”¹⁷³

With his work on the *Déclaration des droits*, Robespierre suggested that the role the state should play in the issues of freedom of conscience was a role of protection, similar to Jefferson’s own opinions. However, as the French Revolution grew in fervor, Robespierre’s opinions seemed to change. When the Jacobin-directed Revolutionary Government was put in place in December of 1793, many individual rights and the new democratic Constitution were put aside.¹⁷⁴ In the months that followed the adoption of the Revolutionary Government, Robespierre began to modify the role the state would play in the issues of freedom of conscience.

An issue that plagued Robespierre during the later years of the French Revolution was that of dechristianization. Sparked by violent anticlericalism in Paris, dechristianization spread from the city outwards to the regions of France most resistant to the revolution. Dechristianization was led most often by militant Jacobins, many of

¹⁷² “The Bill of Rights,” *The Charters of Freedom*, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html (accessed March 28, 2014).

¹⁷³ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 103.

¹⁷⁴ Rudé, *Robespierre; Great Lives Observed*: 58.

whom were involved in theater, a traditional enemy of the Church.¹⁷⁵ Violence and vandalism were leading characteristics of dechristianization. Churches were desecrated, cemeteries vandalized, and, on occasion, church leaders were physically attacked. Opposition to dechristianization came most strongly from clerical leadership, but also from revolutionaries like Robespierre, who saw dechristianization as a baseless attack on a particularly delicate subject that had much support among the French people.¹⁷⁶

On May 7, 1794, Robespierre gave a speech to the National Convention in which he proposed a number of articles dealing with religion. The first article stated that the French people would recognize the existence of the Supreme Being as well as the immortality of the soul.¹⁷⁷ While the adoption of this article would not cause much direct harm to the French people, it did put a halt to the secularization and dechristianization that was continuing to plague France. With the formal recognition by the revolutionary government of the Supreme Being, the revolutionaries promoting dechristianization could no longer claim to be doing the true will of the Revolution. In the same speech, another religious article Robespierre proposed dealt directly with freedom of religion. It reconfirmed the freedom of worship as was set out in an earlier decree.¹⁷⁸ This article was conditional, though, on a following article which stated that any troubles arising out of public worship, as might occur from fanatical preaching on counter-revolutionary ideas, would be punished with “all the rigour of the law.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Schama, *Citizens*: 776.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.: 777.

¹⁷⁷ Rudé, *Robespierre; Great Lives Observed*: 72.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.: 73.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

At its base, Robespierre was not averse to the freedom of conscience. However, he was convinced that certain circumstances could call for a temporary suspension of such freedoms as that of religion. In regard to whether the state should play any role in the freedom of conscience, Robespierre was quite firmly in favor of government involvement. In order to maintain a stable and just society, Robespierre believed it was the state's job to decide when to protect and when to inhibit freedom of conscience for the good of the people.

Implementation of Church-State Ideas

Like Jefferson, Robespierre was a man of action. Though often overly idealistic in his goals, Robespierre was not inclined to stand back and wait for someone else to do the work. If he saw injustice, Robespierre was determined to fight it. Though Robespierre's enemies disagreed sharply, his sister Charlotte did not hesitate to praise his sense of justice:

O mon frère Maximilien! ... Depuis l'instant de ta naissance tu n'as pas cessé de pratiquer la justice, de te signaler par des actions louables et méritantes. Tous ceux qui t'ont connu le savent, ils peuvent l'attester, mais aucun n'a osé le dire jusqu'à présent, tant était grande la terreur que tes ennemis ont su leur inspirer.¹⁸⁰

This sense of justice did not stop with the wrongly accused prisoner or the helpless pauper. Robespierre wished to reshape society, and when the French Revolution began, he was quick to associate himself with the revolutionaries. Though Robespierre had many concerns to wrestle with, he did not set aside the issues of morality and

¹⁸⁰ Robespierre, *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre sur ses deux frères*: 42.

freedom of conscience. Determined that the state should fight against those who threatened to harm basic morality and freedom of religion, Robespierre worked on two major projects to implement his church-state ideas. These were the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* and the *Culte de l'Être suprême*.

As mentioned before, Robespierre was a member of the National Assembly when the first draft of the *Déclaration des droits* was written. Though his contribution to the drafting of the document was limited, he was not uninvolved in the project. Faced with conflicting opinions of many other members of the Assembly, Robespierre's main role during the drafting process was that of defender. When the members of the clergy expressed their wish that freedom of religion should be limited, Robespierre was quick to defend the principle of freedom of conscience.¹⁸¹

The work Robespierre put into the *Déclaration des droits* was little in comparison to the effort he put into the creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being and the national festival associated with it. Worried that the spreading atheistic movement would harm the Revolution by ridding the people of a basis of morality that would keep them accountable for the actions, Robespierre devised a new religion. Verging on pantheism, this new religion praised nature as the priest and the universe the temple of the great Supreme Being.¹⁸²

Whether Robespierre truly believed in the Supreme Being or not, his plan was innovative. Since he believed that morality could be shaped and molded by religion, Robespierre was careful to instill in this new religion what he hoped to be a solid basis of

¹⁸¹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*: 103.

¹⁸² Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*: 632.

morality. The immortality of the soul was a major component of the religion, holding followers accountable for the actions in this life so that they may attain immortality themselves. Also, Robespierre was quick to explain that the best way to worship the Supreme Being was by doing “one’s duty as a man.”¹⁸³ This non-ceremonial worship style not only promoted moral behavior, but also avoided conflict with other religions, mainly Catholicism, that many French were understandably unwilling to let go of. The Cult of the Supreme Being was designed to be a unifying religion that was more patriotic in nature than spiritual.

Since the creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being came shortly before the downfall of its creators, its most lasting effect came through the national festival on the twentieth of Prairial, year two – June 8, 1794. Extravagant and ritualistic, the festival most clearly demonstrated the role Robespierre believed the state should play in religion. Though nature was praised as the true priest, the deputies of the revolutionary government were carefully staged as the metaphorical priests. In fact, each faction of society was issued a place in the festival which suggested the role they were to play in the religion, or more importantly, French society.¹⁸⁴

The Festival of the Supreme Being was a carefully planned event. Artists, composers, poets, and many others besides were hired to help the project come to realization. Robespierre was determined that each detail be perfect. An example of this perfection can be seen in the preparation of the *Hymne à l’Être suprême*. Intending this hymn to act as the main anthem of his new religion, Robespierre hired his normal

¹⁸³ Rudé, *Robespierre; Great Lives Observed*: 72.

¹⁸⁴ Schama, *Citizens*: 834.

composing team. François-Joseph Gossec was to compose the music while Marie-Joseph Chénier was to write the lyrics. Displeased with Chénier's work, Robespierre fired him and hired in his place the poet Théodor Désorgues. When the hymn was finally completed, a new problem arose. Robespierre intended for the hymn to be sung by all participants in the festival, which included thousands of people who had never seen or, more importantly, heard the music. Determined for perfection, a team of music teachers from the Institut National was sent out to teach the people the melody and lyrics in the weeks leading up to the festival.¹⁸⁵

The effort Robespierre put into the hymn was not wasted. Set in E-flat major, the melody is both forceful and resonant.¹⁸⁶ The lyrics are equally powerful:

Dissipe nos erreurs, rends-nous bons, rends-nous justes,
règne, règne au delà du tout illimité;
Enchaîne la Nature à tes décrets augustes,
Laisse à l'homme la Liberté.¹⁸⁷

The Festival of the Supreme Being demonstrated how far Robespierre was willing to go to achieve his goals by involving the state in religious matters. While Robespierre did not seem to envision a future France in which the government was ruled by religion as it had once been, he did not feel the need to create a separation of church and state as Jefferson had. Robespierre had witnessed the destructive consequences dechristianization had played to the Revolution and France, and he was determined not to let such destruction continue.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ A copy of the sheet music of the *Hymne à l'Être suprême* can be found in: Pierre, *Musique de fêtes et ceremonies de la revolution française*: 232-239.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.: 238.

Conclusion – What Lasted?

In part due to the radical nature of the French Revolution and Robespierre's unfortunately violent tendencies, much of the work of the Revolution was reversed in the years to come. The Cult of the Supreme Being disappeared with the execution of Robespierre and Catholicism did what it could to regain power over the people of France despite opposing efforts by revolutionaries.

Robespierre's work regarding religion and the state was not all lost, however. His efforts have survived in the form of the revised *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. This document, with its tenth article assuring that "nul ne doit être inquiété pour ses opinions, même religieuses," is attached to the Constitution of the Fifth Republic of France, adopted in 1958.¹⁸⁸ In the preamble of the Constitution it states, "Le peuple français proclame solennellement son attachement aux Droits de l'Homme et aux principes de la souveraineté nationale tels qu'ils ont été définis par la Déclaration de 1789....," paying homage to the work of those revolutionaries who first set in motion the creation of a republic in France.¹⁸⁹

Though Robespierre is most infamous for his violent revolutionary tactics and ritualistic ardor for a ridiculed revolutionary religion, he should be recognized for his determination to create a moral and stable French society. Idealistic and ambitious in the same way Jefferson was, Robespierre worked relentlessly to create what he believed to be a better France. Although he is not often remembered for his work on church-state

¹⁸⁸ "Constitution de la République française," *Assemblée Nationale*, October 4, 1958, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/constitution.asp> (accessed March 29, 2014).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

issues, Robespierre played a crucial role in shaping the relationship between religion and the state in France, particularly during the French Revolution.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Jefferson and Maximilien Robespierre were both products of the Enlightenment. Both were well-educated in both classical and modern philosophy and faced a period of rapidly changing politics. Both were trained in law, were politically active, and understood the importance of defining the proper relationship between the church and state. And yet, Jefferson and Robespierre reached two strikingly different conclusions on what role the state should play in the realm of religion. Jefferson believed a total separation of church and state was necessary for the survival of the American Republic and the protection of individual liberty. Robespierre, on the other hand, believed that the state should intervene in religious affairs in order to guarantee protection from potentially corrupt religious leaders, and attempted to create a state-sponsored deistic faith.

How did this difference come about? What influences and experiences led Jefferson and Robespierre to come to such different conclusions about the role of state and religion? In earlier chapters, the intellectual influences on Jefferson and Robespierre were examined. These influences included education, religious upbringing, religious culture, and philosophical changes spreading across Europe and the European colonies.

The first chapter examined the most essential influence on the two revolutionaries – the Enlightenment. This period of scientific advancement and social and intellectual criticism led to a fundamental change in how humans interacted with the world. Without the Enlightenment, Jefferson and Robespierre might have grown up in a world entirely different than the one they actually experienced. Without the scientific and philosophical

curiosity that the Enlightenment inspired, it is unlikely that they would have witnessed the Revolutions in which they had played leading roles.

The second and third chapter examined the influences of family, education, religious upbringing, personal faith, and culture. While the Enlightenment had provided a general basis for the design of Jefferson and Robespierre's religious and political ideas, it was these smaller influences that were directly responsible for shaping these ideas. Their families and religious upbringing (or lack thereof) were the first to influence how the two encountered religion and the state. For both Jefferson and Robespierre, their religious upbringing was somewhat conventional. They were both baptized – Jefferson into the Anglican Church and Robespierre into the Catholic Church – but neither was raised specifically to be spiritual.

Childhood for the two revolutionaries held many similarities. Both lost close family members at a young age and experienced change in their family makeup. It was not until their entrance into school that significant differences between Jefferson and Robespierre began to occur. Both schoolboys were initially educated by religious figures, though Robespierre's education contained a great deal more formal religious instruction than Jefferson's. Also, Jefferson's education was heavily influenced by the English Enlightenment, while Robespierre's education was based more on contemporary French ideas. For example, Jefferson was taught the ideas of John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton, grand figures of the English Enlightenment, while Robespierre's education focused more on classical philosophers and some of the French *philosophes*. As was shown in the respective chapters on Jefferson and Robespierre, the texts that were introduced to them during school were directly responsible for many of their church-state

ideas.

Jefferson and Robespierre also differed sharply in their personal faiths. Throughout the majority of his life, Jefferson pondered his own personal beliefs. He wrote letters to his family and friends, asking spiritual questions and urging the recipient to join him in his questioning. He was strongly opposed to the idea of miracles and edited the Gospels so that they included only the morals and philosophy taught by Jesus in an attempt to find the true teachings of Christianity. There is little evidence, however, that Robespierre pondered his personal faith, at least publicly. Unlike Jefferson, he believed in miracles, though this seemed more out of Catholic habit than true belief. Robespierre rated himself a poor Catholic, and showed little indication that he wished to become a better one.

The biggest and, arguably, most important difference in influences on Jefferson and Robespierre's church-state ideas was religious culture. Though both lived in a fundamentally Western environment, the cultural differences between France and the American colonies – later the United States of America – were great. France was a traditionally Catholic country. Everyday life was regulated by the Catholic Church and all members of society were expected to follow the guidelines the Church designed. The future United States was not quite so religiously uniform. Though the majority of Americans were Protestant, beliefs differed between denominations and even individual congregations. Also, while France had been Catholic for centuries, the United States had never been dominated by any one sect of Christianity. With the hopes of escaping religious persecution, many different people with religious differences emigrated to the British colonies, creating a diverse religious environment from the beginning.

All of these influences were responsible for shaping Jefferson and Robespierre's understanding of how the church and the state should interact. Jefferson, whose strong personal faith helped him feel a more personal connection with religion, concentrated his efforts on establishing freedom of religion as a basic right of man. In contrast, Robespierre concentrated his efforts on ensuring that religion remained a basis of morality for French society. Jefferson, who grew up in a religiously diverse environment was opposed to any sort of state religion, while Robespierre, who had grown up in a Catholic controlled France, did not find fault in creating a state religion that protected people from what he saw as a corrupt clerical establishment.

Though Jefferson and Robespierre were similar in many ways, particularly during the early years of their lives, a few key differences led them to encountering the church-state issues in contrasting ways. From the earlier examination of these two historical figures, it can be concluded that personal faith and religious culture were the two most important factors in shaping Jefferson and Robespierre's ideas on how the church and state should interact.

Another major influence that cannot be ignored was the religious nature of the revolutions that Jefferson and Robespierre faced. Overall, the American Revolution had fewer religious implications than the French Revolution. Though the establishment of the freedom of religion was product of the American Revolution, there had been little hostility towards religious establishments before or during the Revolution. This was not the case in the French Revolution, however. In France, the Catholic Church was seen as being directly linked to the French monarchy. Members of the clergy were given special privileges that, even before the Revolution, many third estate members felt to be unjust.

The French Revolution aided the opposition against the clergy and created an anticlerical environment that led to an attempt at dechristianizing France.

This difference in religious aspects of the Revolutions that Jefferson and Robespierre faced greatly influenced their approach church-state issues. Jefferson, who did not see exaggerated violence for or against religion, was able to theorize about religion and the state in a rather idealistic manner. Immediate action was not necessary but could come gradually. Robespierre, on the other hand, was forced to find an immediate solution to the relationship between church and state. Dechristianization was spreading rapidly throughout France and threatened the stability of the Republic France was attempting to adopt.

The fundamental difference between their approaches to the church-state issue was their attitudes towards a state religion. Jefferson argued that the state should be separated from religion entirely in order to create a stable Republic. Conversely, Robespierre argued that a state religion was necessary for a stable Republic because it provided a controlled basis of morality.

Ironically, while religion played a key role in the French Revolution and only a marginal role in the American Revolution, it was the results of the American Revolution that fundamentally changed the expectations of the relationship between religion and the state. Robespierre's creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being, while eccentric, was not a new solution. However, Jefferson's creation of a separation of church and state was. Though Jefferson and Robespierre's conclusions on how to encounter the relationship between the church and the state both held merit, it was Jefferson's solution that would stand the test of time.

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