

OpenTheo

The Spirit and Flesh of Thomas Jefferson with Thomas Kidd

June 30, 2022



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Kevin welcomes Tommy Kidd to LBE to talk about Tommy's new biography on Thomas Jefferson. How should we understand Jefferson's many inconsistencies and contradictions? How do we make sense of his significant moral failings? Was he a Christian? Is his legacy worth commemorating and celebrating? Kevin and Tommy talk about these questions and many others in an hour-long discussion that goes deep into history and helps us think about the Declaration of Independence that Americans will celebrate in just a few days.

Timestamps:

Intro and Guest: Thomas Kidd [0:00-6:32]

The Discipline of Writing [6:33-10:14]

Jefferson: Historical Hypocrite? [10:15-32:41]

Sally Hemmings [32:42-38:20]

Jefferson's Religion [38:21-52:47]

The Mammoth Cheese Episode [52:48-56:33]

Jefferson vs. Patrick Henry [56:34-59:06]

Father of the University of Virginia [59:07-1:04:02]

Why Celebrate Jefferson? [1:04:03-1:10:46]

Books and Everything:

Thomas Kidd's Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/thomasskidd>

Thomas Kidd's newsletter: <https://twitter.us3.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=393885e6de8bef994ad9a4c3b&id=f10e42555a>

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. This is Kevin DeYoung and I'm glad to be joined with my special guest. Dr. Thomas S. Kidd, Tommy, I'll turn it over him in just a moment.

I do want to thank all of our listeners who have followed with LBE throughout this season and I'm going to take a break over the summer. So I think this is the last podcast for a little bit but the timing is good here because we're going to talk about Tommy's book on Thomas Jefferson right as we come into the Fourth of July weekend but grateful for crossway sponsorship throughout this season and also Westminster Books at various points and be looking forward Lord willing to be back at the end of the summer beginning of the fall with a new season of guests and we'll have some time to have Colin and Justin back on as well. So for this last episode last not least Tommy thank you for being here and just tell us a little bit about yourself, about your education background, your faith and about the move that you and your faith in.

What did you think your family just made and then we'll jump into the book. Sure well I grew up in South Carolina and went to Clemson University mostly that was just because I like Clemson football. I was I had my best friend in high school was a believer and he was sharing the gospel with me and he got involved with the navigators at Clemson and that's how I became a Christian as he led me through an evangelistic study so I became a Christian my freshman year at Clemson and over time both got more intellectually engaged as a person and as a believer and got interested in doing graduate work in history.

And so I ended up going to Notre Dame for a PhD and working with George Marston who some listeners may know his biography of Jonathan Edwards and other work in American religious history. And so I got a job at Baylor in 2002 and have had been there for 20 years but over time I had started working as a visiting professor at Midwestern Baptist Seminary in Kansas City and got sort of a taste for for that and so we have just just moved full time to Midwestern and as I'm talking to you now have just moved to Kansas City so all the associated chaos with that but it's really an exciting time and Midwestern is just growing like crazy and it's an exciting opportunity for me to work directly with pastors which I really didn't get to do it at Baylor since I was in a history department and so we're just so excited for this new chapter the Lord's taken us into and how much will your work be similar and how much is going to be different because you're still a historian you're doing that but very different schools with different aims and different people that are coming how much overlap and how much is this going to be a different kind of work for you Tommy Yeah I'm hopeful that I'll be writing at the same pace I always have and Midwestern's been very generous about the structure or the position

that they want me to keep writing so that hopefully will be the same that the classes and students that I'm teaching will be different to a significant extent I mean one is that because Midwestern is a seminary I'm not going to be we have an undergraduate college but I'm going to be teaching almost exclusively in the seminary and so whereas at Baylor at least half of my teaching responsibility was with undergrads here it's going to be with seminarians doing indives and PhDs and that sort of thing and these people are wanting to be pastors are already our pastors for the most part where at Baylor I was especially in the history graduate program I was training people to teach in history departments normally in crushing contacts but so that's where the shift is going to be but but I'm excited about in some ways I'll actually be able to teach a little more in my area of specialty because I'm teaching seminarians so in the fall for instance I'm teaching a class on the first and second grade awakenings which is a class that I never taught at Baylor so I'm writing my wheelhouses for my expertise so I'm excited about that part and in some ways I'll be able to be even more focused here than I have been before and how does your family feel about it your wife kids yeah I mean my wife is a middle school science teacher so she's employable wherever she goes but for my kids it's definitely a transition time and then my older son is going to Dallas Baptist University in the fall so he was going to be transitioning out of the house anyway and then my younger son is going into a senior year in high school so he's going to do that here and so that's you know that's a challenging transition for him but it's what he wanted to do I actually offered to commute for a year or so he could finish out but we decided we were all going to move together and that sort of made it more convenient for me and my wife good that we'll get right into book but I want to hear a little bit about your writing process I think if I remember these anecdotes correctly you know different people and different writing professions or even creative professions have different ways of doing things and some people are wait till inspiration hits them or go for seasons without doing something and then they're all in but I think I remember hearing Paul Simon the singer songwriter just make a point every day to try to write some sort of music or some sort of verses whether it comes in I think Jerry Seinfeld said that about just writing some jokes each day now you're not writing jokes or music but you're writing history and you have a good reputation of being very diligent and disciplined I forget if it's 1500 words or what exactly your word limit is each day but you really set out each working day to get something done and little by little those add up to really a very prolific writing career already so say a little bit about how you go about the discipline of writing and it's not just you know opinion pieces these are really well researched scholarly sorts of books how do you do that? Right yeah I am known for that and I talk about that a lot in my newsletter which people are interested they can find a subscription link and my Twitter at Thomas S kid but yeah I'm known for 1000 words a day and I mean there are writers who do more than 1000 present historian Anthony Grafton I think does 2500 which seems kind of extreme to me but 1000 and the number doesn't really matter that much I mean you might be in a career situation where 250 is more reasonable but for me 1000 I think helps to keep me on pace for various writing projects that I'm committed to at any given

time and so and I'm definitely of the Paul Simon school of you know that it's better to just go ahead and write some every day rather than waiting for inspiration because I just don't I normally just don't especially when I start writing in the morning I usually don't feel inspired in fact I usually felt you know so the Paul of procrastination and struggle to get going and so if I just know that that's normal and I'm going to write some that day and hold myself to you know a rough standard about what a productive day looks like yeah when I'm in the writing process that's that's pretty standard work day for me and yeah I mean I even as with the move to Kansas City I kind of had in the back of my mind that I needed to get back to that discipline as soon as I could and so the past couple working days I've written a thousand words and that really helps me to feel like I'm you know and you know for the writing life is sort of solitary and can be kind of hard to know whether you're being productive or not and so having that word count really helps me with that. Yeah well you've you've been very prolific in writing really good stuff and a number of biographies already and this one just came out with Yale Thomas Jefferson and biography of spirit and flesh I just finished this last night and thank you for it.

So right off the bat why another biography of Thomas Jefferson I mean there may not be as many things as say Martin Luther Abraham Lincoln but there must be pretty close to the number of things that have already been written about Thomas Jefferson. So what what is your angle here what is your overarching thesis what are you trying to tell us about Thomas Jefferson obviously some things that scholars would have you know travers many times but you're trying to say something unique or new or in a different way or you wouldn't have written the books so why another book on Thomas Jefferson and what are you trying to communicate through this biography. Right there are many many books on kind of every conceivable topic about Jefferson and what this is not as a blow by blow political biography which there are some very fine examples of that and those are worthwhile for sure because Jefferson had such a long and many successful political career but what I'm trying to do in this book is is to answer the what I think is probably the most pressing question about Jefferson, which is kind of the how could he question and that's you know in our culture right now and in light of all the you know the racial tension that we have and and you know grappling with our national history with regard to slavery and so forth.

There's a lot of people when they think about times Jefferson that they think how how could he say all men are created equal and the declaration and yet not only own hundreds of people as slaves but we were almost certain that he carried on along standing sexual relationship with one of his slaves Sally Hemings. And so how could he do that and and that that is part of the ethical conundrum of Thomas Jefferson. He's he's an enigmatic figure in terms of religion his ethical commitments and then the way that he actually lived.

And so I'm trying to probe beyond just the what comes so easily which is just say well he's a hypocrite. And that that probably is it's fair to a certain extent but it's not a very

historical answer. Right.

It tends to be the way we act now on social media and so forth. It's just if there's someone with problems in the past, which I think to some extent is everybody has ever lived except for a certain carpenter son from Nazareth. Yeah, right.

You know if we can identify problems that are particularly aggravating from a modern perspective we just say well that they were a hypocrite or a center and therefore we would cancel them. And I certainly think that Jefferson did things that were morally atrocious. But I also think that we can just sit with the ambivalence and the enigmatic character of Jefferson and think about what he actually believed what what his kind of ethical philosophical religious system was.

And then how that matched up with how he actually lived and I think just sitting with those tensions and paradoxes is a worthwhile historical project and so that's basically what I'm trying to do in this book. So I think I remember reading Gordon Woods say the famous historian say something like, you know, ever since Jefferson's death and even while he was still alive. In some ways the whole American experiment has interpreted has been interpreted on the the back of Thomas Jefferson for good or for ill.

So, as Jefferson goes so goes America or as we're looking at America so we go back and look at Jefferson so if we want to say America is this great land of liberty and equality. We go to Jefferson's view on rights and what he did as a state of Virginia and of course most famously in the declaration if we want to say that America from the very beginning was not just hypocritical but was built on the literal backs of enslaved persons. Sexual predators would be a contemporary phrase you go back and you make that case with Jefferson or you can say Jefferson was the great hero of the agrarian farmer and he was the one who had unbounding enthusiasm in the common man.

And one of again Gordon Woods chapters he looking at the founders he ends by just highlighting Jefferson's great confidence, which came to be really rocked at the end of his life as he grew more aware of how this American experiment he helped to launch was not going the way he had thought it would be. And it would ends by saying because he had this unending confidence in the American people we remember him and not James Madison. Well I remember James Madison I like James Madison.

So I haven't forgotten him but but I understand the the broader point that Madison had a little bit more of a realistic sense of who we are. So your book is really helpful in that you're you are presenting a picture of Jefferson warts and all nobody's going to read this book and say, oh wow I didn't, you know Tommy's presenting a Jefferson who is just this great hero. No, you actually come away seeing really up close and personal, not just on the race issue or slave issue but you know as a Christian, we would say his his various twists or at least seem to be liaisons with different women.

So my question Tommy is you worked on this probably over the course of years you already knew something a lot about Jefferson you've written in this area many times but having written the book did you come away from this with more of an appreciation for Jefferson or more disappointed in Jefferson. I think more disappointed. I knew about the slavery part of course it's hard to escape that as a professional historian.

I knew about his sort of exotic religious views and a little bit about the Jefferson Bible, which is his kind of kind of say condensation of the gospels into a mostly a naturalistic kind of ethical treatise of Jesus's teachings but one of the things I didn't quite realize was what a disaster he was in terms of his personal finances. Yeah, yeah, say more about that because I wanted to, that comes to really clearly in the biography and isn't the sort of thing that's going to be on a plaque at Mount Rushmore and yet dominated his life in a lot of ways so just keep going about his mountains of indebtedness Yeah, yeah and to be fair I mean a lot of the people, especially in the south the planters in aristocrats in the south of Jefferson's generation that they tended to be in debt and sometimes they managed that well and sometimes didn't and Jefferson didn't And yes, it was a shadow over his personal life. He lamented it.

He inherited a lot of debt from his father-in-law. He inherited slaves and land and debt and that proved very difficult for him to ever get out from under and part of the reason for that is that Jefferson I think was really a compulsive spender and he had things that he wanted to buy and to build that he just never seemed to have considered the option that maybe he didn't need to do it. And that was particularly the case I think with his hosting and entertaining responsibilities which were very significant as a diplomat in Paris.

I think this is where it probably really started is getting a taste for Parisian culture and wine. And then as president, of course, the president in those days had to pay out a pocket for household expenses and he spent like nobody's business. There were years where he spent more at the president's mansion in DC.

He spent more on just wine than on paying his household staff. He liked his his fine wine. He sure did.

And he at one point actually told his French wine agent that prices no object just get me the best vintage. And it was quite happy to comply with that request. And it comes to Monticello.

I mean when he, there were two different versions of Monticello and Charlottesville is mansion there. He built one relatively modest version that immediately tore it down and started on a much more lavish second version. And when he was done with the second version, then he started on another mansion in near Lynchburg at Poplar Forest in Virginia.

And you just think, why do you keep doing this when you are also constantly talking about how much you hate being in debt. And some of the entertaining in politics is understandable, but a lot of it is just because he had this kind of idealized view of what his private world should be like and he was just bound and determined to manifest that. Yeah, it's hard for, at least I find it hard to, well there's a number of aspects of Jefferson that are hard to grasp and reconcile, say more about that.

But this is another one of those. And you're right, this was not uncommon among genteel southerners, you know, Washington had it to some extent, but didn't finish in as such dire straits as Jefferson did. It reminds me that old, I don't know if you ever saw that old SNL sketch, it has Steve Martin and they're doing somebody is doing a little infomercial on this little book about debt.

And it's just one page and it says, don't buy things you can't afford. What, how does that work? Well, he sort of want to give Jefferson that book, but he had such a vision for this enlightened, he was cosmopolitan and yet agrarian and he liked the hustle and bustle the city but of course Monticello was his lifelong project. Why do you think for him and for that sort of planter class, you know, because he ended, you said it was at two and a half million dollars in our terms in debt, a hundred thousand dollars and then so it's a lot of money.

Was it just his own sense of what the sort of person he thought he was meant to be that led him to this you would think there must be people around him and the people in to whom he was in arrears who just said, okay, you got a big wonderful house, stop with all of the wine and the exotic plants and why did it never occur to him to just, okay, trim back, read your books and stop living a life that you can't afford. Yeah, it's hard to say for sure, but I do think that part of it is what he thought he, the way he thought he had to live and he had to entertain and host as a Virginia gentleman. And also as an exemplar of the enlightenment.

And so when, for instance, when he was in bad shape in the 18 teens, you know, ten years before his death, but then what really sealed his fate was that he, he co-signed alone with a relative in the late 18 teens. And then, and then that person almost immediately died. And then the nation entered the panic of 1819, which was an economic depression at the time.

And so Jefferson called that his coup de gras. And at that point, there was no way he was ever going to get anywhere close to being solvent. So, so he, he, in that case, I think you see, there's some bad luck.

That's definitely part of the story, but, you know, anybody with any financial sense would have recommended to him. Do not co-sign this huge loan with, with this person, but he felt obligated, I think as a gentleman, and to return favors and to, to, to be seen as being generous and not to think about money in kind of grubby way. And so I don't, I just don't

know if he really thought not co-signing that loan was an option.

And it just totally sealed his fate. And I think in that, I mean, that's, that's probably the number one moment that, that was so disastrous for him, but it also, I think, is representative of his whole life that there were a lot of experience. And there were a lot of expenses and financial commitments that he made that he just didn't seem to feel like he had any option to do otherwise.

Yeah, I think you, you know, it was \$20,000. So that's a fifth of his, his at death indebtedness. So that was no small thing.

You know, you mentioned this earlier, Tommy, and historians often, you know, write about people in the past and mention their inconsistencies and their clay feet and, and that's true and that's going to be true of everyone. It does seem with Jefferson that the seeming at least inconsistencies or paradoxes get cranked up to 11, that's final tap would say. So you have this that he was, you know, really adamant that the nation live within its financial means, but he didn't.

He, you can find certain, you can find, you know, throughout his political career statements on slavery that are very commendable, wanting it, you know, recognizing it as an evil, wanting to see the slave trade. And private assurances to many people along the way that this was a bad thing. And yet that didn't translate into his personal life.

You can look at the way he, you point out, he was almost invariably magnanimous in public and knew how to say the right things that we can, and that's good. It's good to, it's better to have, you know, your public figures be magnanimous in public, even if they're not so in private, but you said his, you know, animosity towards some of the other founders even was as intense as anyone in that generation. He had a particular loathing for Patrick Henry about whom you've also written a biography.

So you can just go, you know, all across the spectrum with Jefferson and we haven't even gotten to religion, which I want to make sure we spend some considerable time on. But how do you explain how do these things hold together or as a biographer, do you throw up your hands and say, I just don't know, but that's the Jefferson we have to us in the historical record and we just have to deal with him. How do you make sense of what are really some pretty monumental different kinds of Jefferson's.

Yeah. Well, I think it's a challenge that we're really wrestling with in our cultural moment is, you know, how do you still appreciate, you know, good things about someone like Jefferson when they're such manifest, you know, appalling behavior. And I think I think one of the things that I think through this issue as a historian is thinking about, you know, what was realistic at the time.

I mean, you don't, you don't want to go in the direction of sort of moral relativism. But,

you know, you look at somebody, for instance, a couple other people that I've spent a good time researching writing about is Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield, you know, evangelical leaders in the mid 1700s and both slave owners. And so Christian to really struggle to know what to do with with them.

And, you know, for both that it was wrong for them to be involved with slavery. And they should have known better. You know, Whitfield's sin in that in that matter, I think is much more grievous.

I mean, in the sense that Whitfield is is a pro slavery activist, where Edwards, I think, is just sort of, you know, he's owns a few slaves, rights very little about it certainly doesn't do anything politically about it the way that Whitfield does. But both of them have almost no one in their lives who is saying to them, don't you know that slavery is wrong? I mean, it's just so baked into Anglo American culture at the time that they just don't have many people around them. I mean, John Wesley comes out later against slavery.

John Newton comes out later against slavery, but Edwards and Whitfield are both dead by that time. So some of it has to do with the context. And in Jefferson's case, you know, he, he not only said that he knew slavery was wrong, but he did have people throughout his life, including a couple of people he was, you know, relatively close to like the Adams.

Yeah, like the Adams who knew that slavery was wrong and even in a few cases, he had Virginians who were pressing him to follow their example. These are people who came to believe usually as Christians that slavery was wrong. And so they were emancipating their own slaves and neither moving with them or helping them to get out of the state, which was legally required if you were going to emancipate your slaves and they were pleading with Jefferson to set an example and do the same thing and going back to the financial.

I mean, this was something that Jefferson could just, even if he was so inclined, he was such a disaster financially that there was no way he was going to think about freeing his own slaves because, you know, Jefferson was quite candid. They're his capital. Right.

I mean, if he's ever going to make money. He's got the money is going to be coming from slave grown agricultural products. So, you know, Jefferson is, is, you know, confronted with this issue.

And then, you know, it's also not entirely uncommon for slave masters to have sexual relationships with their enslaved women in particular. In fact, we are pretty well certain that Sally Hemings is Martha Jefferson's half sister, Jefferson's wife's half sister because they have the same father, the slave master, Martha Jefferson's and Sally Hemings father. And so, you know, it's, it's a known practice to be having sexual relationship with enslaved women.

But it is, it is still, you know, you talk about that it gets amplified with Jefferson. And there are patterns of behavior that I think warrant the kind of amplification of our moral indignation about the way that he actually lived, especially in light of his stated belief on the issue of slavery in particular, that it was wrong in both Christian categories and the categories of the more secular enlightenment. And so just stay here for a bit because this is the, you know, you say this is the central question in his moral universe or at least our interpretation of it.

And perhaps the most famous or infamous relationship or at least relationship question in the history of America is Jefferson and Sally Hemings and you said, you know, she is the offspring of the same father as Jefferson's deceased wife. And then the mother there I think you said was, was herself the, the, a mixed race slave. And so you, and then Hemings, I mean, at one point you say later in life, she was recorded as a free white woman.

So there were, there were obviously within her own lineage had been several of these slave master and slave relationships, which of course were right to decry. Do we have any sense, and I think the answer is we just don't know for sure, but do we have any sense of what a relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was like any sense. You said at the end that she almost certainly was there attending to him at the end of his life, which suggests, however things started out not, you know, excusing that at all, but perhaps there was a genuine tenderness or affection between them.

How do we make sense and what do you think as someone who looked into the sources to understand what was the nature of their relationship. Yeah, I think it's important on the Hemings Jefferson relationship to kind of just draw a line at a certain point of saying we don't know. There's, I think like everything else in American culture, it tends to go to extremes of, you know, in some movie or artistic relations, representations of the relationship.

But there has been this kind of interest in representing it as there's some kind of romance or love or something like that there. And then the, you know, the other extreme is people who insist that you have to call it right. It's just lifelong predation and nothing else.

And here I'm really just following a net Gordon Reed, who it's the most influential scholar of that relationship. And she's a historian at Harvard and, and, you know, it's, there's a just kind of an opaque nature to their relationship because of course Hemings doesn't leave written accounts of her life or the life of her life. Or the relationship.

And Jefferson doesn't either. So everything that we say about it is circumstantial and inferential. I mean, it is undoubtedly coercive.

I mean, because slavery is coercive. So if she's owned by him, then there is an

irreducible level at which this is a coercive relationship where Jefferson wields. The power.

I think the most intriguing aspect that that could introduce a very limited contextualized sort of what would we say an agency for for Sally Hemings is that according to one of her sons, who talk openly in the mid 1800s about how Thomas Jefferson was his father. He said that, that when they were getting ready to leave Paris because that we think that the relationship started when she was a teenager in Paris. And the 30 year or so age difference between them also feeds into the coercive nature of the relationship.

That she could have that slavery was not legal in France. And so she could have pursued a case for her freedom. Now, I mean, she's a teenager and a slave.

So she has, you know, limited resources to do this. But the son suggested that that she made him Thomas Jefferson promise that if she went back to Virginia with him, that he would agree to free any children that they had together. And if that is true, that is a promise that Jefferson seems to have followed through on because he freed almost none of his slaves.

But the ones that he either several the ones that he either let run away or he freed in his will, we think were children that he had by Sally Hemings. And so that kind of adds to the idea that that maybe there was some kind of negotiated, you know, aspect to their relationship, but that I wouldn't want to go any further than that because we just, we simply don't know. And what we do know is that she was his slave and therefore this relationship, I think by definition is coercive.

So, yeah, we could spend the rest of the time on that. And that's really important. Let's make sure we talk about his religion because you say a biography of spirit and flesh.

And you really do a nice job of trying to understand again, an aspect of Jefferson that is not simple. There's really nothing. Well, not nothing about him.

He is in some ways you could say a quintessential 18th century enlightenment sort of figure. That's, that's who he wants to be at least. But when you get deep into what makes him tick, it's rarely simple.

And so his religious views. Again, you said it well earlier. We tend to extreme interpretations, especially with Jefferson.

You know, some have tried to make the case that Jefferson, wow, he really looked at all these things he said about Christianity and, you know, Christians, we should hold him up as he really became one of us. And a great heroic founding father, Christian, and of course other people, famous, you know, the most obvious example is the Jefferson Bible cutting out the miracles and the supernatural and say, this man wanted nothing to do with anything remotely like Christianity. And so I would make a good case for, I would

say neither of those interpretations in that as Jefferson, especially later in life, he almost had something like a conversion experience, not as we would understand it as evangelicals, but moving from more skepticism or outright racism.

And perhaps there's some political motivation, but I think you're arguing that it was, there was a genuineness to it as well, that he came to see himself as a Christian as a Unitarian. He believed in God's providence. He believed in the pure commands of Jesus.

And he was did not believe in the Trinity or any, you know, fine, doctrinal formulation. You say probably the worst prediction he ever made in his life is that before long everyone, every young man in the country would be a Unitarian. So, actually almost no one is a Unitarian.

So he was very wrong about that. We can be thankful. But say a little bit more how you understand his religious commitment, and particular how it grew and changed and cemented over the last, you know, 25 years of his life.

Yeah, I think that as a young man, he does go through a very skeptical phase that could have even, you know, veered towards kind of agnosticism or, I think atheism is probably too strong, because you see in the declaration, how deeply theistic he is in the sense of believing in a created order. And for Jefferson, this isn't, and everybody else in 1776, I mean, this isn't really a decision that you make. I mean, it's just, it's obvious in American culture at the time and they just really aren't atheists.

In 1776, I mean, you really have to get that word is known, but it kind of means someone who acts as if there is in a God. And atheism as an intellectual proposition is kind of waiting until, you know, decades into the 1800s in America. And so, you know, he is very skeptical.

And I think he even believes that Jesus, while a great moral teacher was not necessarily even the greatest moral teacher of antiquity. You know, other he likes the Epicurean teachers and their ideal of tranquility. And that's part of what he's trying to do at Monticello, I think is to create an ideal, you know, tranquil haven for himself.

But I think he, he over time is stung by the charges that he is a heretic that he's not a Christian. And it's a huge issue in the 1800 presidential campaign about, you know, that people are saying in the Federalist Party who, who despised Jefferson that he is not fit to be president because he is not a Christian. And so that's known at the time that he has these heterodox views.

And he's stung by that. He's stung by the public revelation of his relationship with Sally Hemings, which comes out in 1802. So that's widely nationally reported that he has this relationship with Sally Hemings.

And so he's embarrassed, you know, about these kinds of charges and reports in front of

his family. He hates the thought that his daughters, you know, might think that he's not a Christian. And so he at the same time becomes familiar with some key Unitarian theologians and pastors.

And the most important one is Joseph Priestley, who is from England and then comes to America. And they develop an active, fairly brief letter writing relationship where Priestley basically explains to Jefferson. What it looks like to be kind of a purely ethical Christian.

In other words, it is possible to set aside the kind of supernatural claims about Christianity and things like the Trinity, which, you know, Enlightenment folks, you know, kind of mock and revile as being just nonsense. And so Jefferson is really attracted at that moment in his life, strikingly, while he's president, that he had found a version of Christianity that he found intellectually defensible and also ethically attractive. And I think he was genuinely attracted to the, you know, neighborly love ideal in Christianity that he thought was unique in world historical ethical context.

And so he accepts Priestley's and it's not a spiritual conversion, but as you said, but it's an intellectual conversion that he goes from thinking that Jesus was kind of an important teacher. And then important teacher of antiquity, whose writings we have some access to in the Bible, though, he thinks lots of the Bible, including the gospels is unreliable. And so he latches on to Priestley's version of Jesus's ethics.

Besides, I am a Christian, but he qualifies that by saying, you know, only in an ethical sense and setting aside the kind of claims about Jesus's divinity in particular. And that's what he's six with for the rest of his life. And that's when he says I am a Christian.

That's what he means by it. It's interesting and I guess I should have known this, but your biography helped me to relearn it again. You know, many of these controversies surrounding Jefferson, we talk about Sally Hemings, we talk about his Christianity or lack thereof.

These were talked about within his lifetime, you know, often brought up by his opponents. And so you have to take some of those with a grain of salt, but it wasn't as if these things were unknown or untalked about. And they did dog him, especially this charge of being an infidel and being too close to Hume.

One of the sadnesses for me as a Presbyterian and I think you know I did my doctoral work on Witherspoon and Benjamin Rush intersects with Witherspoon. You know, Rush is just everywhere it seems like he just kind of just pops up at everything. Oh, and then there's Benjamin Rush he's doing something important.

So he was instrumental in convincing Witherspoon to come to America to be the president of Princeton. And at that point was, you know, very firmly an evangelical, a

friend of the Awakenings. I think if I remember the anecdote correctly, he even married his wife because she's considered John Witherspoon the best preacher she had ever heard.

And yet by the, you know, later in Rush's life, he has more of a rationalistic Christianity. So he's also influential in helping Jefferson come to terms with this new kind of Christianity that seems palatable for enlightenment sensibilities and I just have to admit that that happens and wish Rush, you know, the younger Rush hadn't morphed into the older Rush. And leads to it, a question, especially for you are expert Baptist theologian with all of this about Jefferson and his religion.

Isn't it the case that Baptist were among his, his most ardent supporters and why, why is that? Yeah, the Baptist love Jefferson, and it was almost all because of religious liberty. And he had had fought for religious liberty in Virginia in this 1770s and 80s. And at the time, Virginia still had a formal established church, the Church of England.

And it was in Virginia in the late 1760s, early 1770s, when he and Madison were sort of cutting their teeth as, you know, young politicians. And it was also a season of terrible persecution against the Baptist in Virginia and some other places in America, but that's where I think we're the Presbyterians doing it. Well, the Presbyterians were sometimes being persecuted themselves in Virginia, but some of the Presbyterians like Jefferson too for the same reason, but the Baptist were sort of the wildest evangelical group.

So they came in for the most persecution. And so there, you know, there were dozens of Baptist preachers put in jail by the early 1770s in Virginia. And so Jefferson believes that the government needs to get out of the business of having an official church.

And he thinks that the government needs to stop persecuting people. I mean, Jefferson probably kind of thinks the Baptists are nuts, but, you know, they don't deserve to be persecuted. He thinks by the government for their, you know, odd beliefs about baptism.

And he also knows that if they persecute the Baptist, they'll come after people like him next. And so he just thinks that the persecution needs to stop. The government needs to stop promoting one particular denomination and just have a kind of free market of religion where, you know, the different churches are just allowed to do what they want.

And so the Baptist love this and they latch on to him as their kind of political champion. And this helps to explain why when Jefferson writes the Wall Separation Letter in 1802, it is addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut who had written him a kind of, you know, really over the top, fawning celebratory letter about how delighted they are that he's been elected President. And, you know, they know that they're not on the same page with him theologically, but they love that he's their champion of religious liberty and is going to bring an end, they hope to the state establishments of religion.

And so that it creates, I think, a sort of wonderful partnership between people who are very different theologically, a partnership in politics and, you know, talking about, you know, what's redeemable about Jefferson's legacy. And I think religious liberty, especially for me as a Baptist, is right at the top of the list, because, you know, he really, he and Madison, I think, are substantially to be credited with forming the ideas and then leading the political charge for full religious liberty in America. And then you Baptist didn't just start getting interested in religious liberty like five years ago or something.

No, no, we were interested when we had pastors in jail on the show. Yeah, yeah, that was very, very true. And you point out several times in the book, though, he wasn't looking to promote evangelical or reformed men into positions or will say more about UVA in a moment.

Yet there was a time where he did financially support this one Calvinist and he had friendly relations with them. So it wasn't as if these sort of evangelical enthusiasts had no part in Jefferson's life or in his intellectual purview or that he thought they were irredeemably superstitious. So again, I do think that's one commendable part of Jefferson's character and religious record, even though we disagree with him and, you know, don't go looking for good theological insight from Jefferson.

I want you to just go back to the Danbury Baptist from if, you know, they're making a movie of Jefferson's life, and they need just a little bit of comic relief in the middle of all of these hard things going on it might be the mammoth cheese episode. Can you talk about how this came to loom literally large in Jefferson's life, this mammoth block of cheese. Yeah, it really is hilarious.

So that weekend that he sent the wall separation letter. It was New Year's Day weekend of 1802, and he had been elected finally after a very difficult election in 1800. And he was originally named as president in the spring of 1801.

And, but there had been a lot of charges against him that he was anti Christian that he was going to lead a kind of French revolutionary style campaign against Christianity. And so he was looking for ways to demonstrate that he really is sympathetic to the general interests of religion, which basically met Christianity at that time in America. And so he was very happy to have the support of evangelical groups when he could get it.

And the Baptists were the key constituency, nationally, who, not all of them, there were some key Baptist leaders in the north in particular who did not like Jefferson but groups like the Danbury Baptist loved him and, and one newing on Baptist and preacher itinerant evangelist was was John Jefferson, who had gotten to be friends with Jefferson in Virginia. But by Jefferson's presidency, he had gone back to New England. And so he got together with these New England Baptists and created this 1200 pound block of cheese.

And he wanted to give him as a gift and it was a huge media deal about reporting on the progress of the mammoth cheese being brought by wagon and ship from New England down to Washington DC and the newspapers are punning on everything mammoth and cheese. And so, you know, it's a hoot. And so, Leland brings the cheese to Jefferson and then they publicized the Danbury Baptist letter and then his response to the Danbury Baptist and then the Sunday of that weekend Leland preaches at a meeting before members of Congress and Jefferson.

And it's kind of embarrassing to just Leland preaches on the gospel text, behold one greater than Solomon is here. It's a little over the top for my taste but, you know, and the Federalists who are there who can't stand Jefferson think the whole thing is just a total embarrassment but it does show I think that that yes, Jefferson needs Christians like that to help him show that he has Christian supporters, even evangelical supporters. And it also means that, you know, Jefferson, in any group that he's part of socially, he's going to be an outlier in terms of his religious beliefs.

So he's constantly having to contend with and partner with and accommodate evangelicals reform Christians who are in his political circles and so he's just used to that and it translates into the idea that he also has the evangelical and reform friends, but some of whom are lifelong friends. So that segues to it. You can stay a few more minutes, a couple more questions but why you say Patrick Henry was the white whale in his life.

And I think it's complicated. I mean, there are a lot of people that Jefferson hates and I do mean, there were other people that do like Patrick Henry. Yeah, yeah, and and Henry would could be a pre aggravating figure but Patrick Henry, as of the beginning of the revolution is the most popular politician in Virginia.

Now, if Washington was there, he probably would serve that role but he's gone because of the war and then and then his presidency. And so Patrick Henry can get elected as governor of Virginia anytime he wants. And Jefferson is just not that popular.

And so I think Jefferson resents that and it turns out that Henry is opposed politically to just about everything that Madison and Jefferson want to do. And for Henry, I think it is mostly a political issue for Madison. It's mostly a political issue, but Jefferson takes it very personally.

And so it gets so extreme that by the time Jefferson is off in Paris, Madison is reporting to him regularly and letters about, you know, here's the latest awful thing that Patrick Henry has done. And so the height of it is at one point, Jefferson writes to Madison and says, what we need to do, I think, is to begin praying for Patrick Henry's death. You got religion there.

You know, I don't know if Jefferson was joking or not, but they did write it in code.

Jefferson Madison had a secret code that they would use so that people wouldn't find out what they were saying. So they wrote that in code.

And that's a pretty extreme thing. But even after Henry died and into the early 1800s, Jefferson was known to be complaining to visitors in Monticello about how Henry got too much credit for the liberty or death speech. And things like that.

So it really was borderline obsession for Jefferson. Wow. So at the end of his life, Jefferson is thinking very much about his legacy and how he will be remembered and he instructs for his own gravestone.

Author of the Declaration of American Independence of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia. Famously doesn't mention that, oh, by the way, was president of the United States. And of course, he dies the same day John Adams does on the 50th anniversary of independence.

And, you know, how could a Christian population not take that as a sign of some divine favor or divine providence that these two founding fathers live 50 years and die exactly the 50th anniversary on the same day? But before I ask you a wrap up question on Jefferson's life, just go to this last part that he mentions on his gravestone, of course, is the father of the University of Virginia, which was a great passion for his. And you point out that people can misunderstand what Jefferson meant when he said, and he may not have said in these exact terms, but that, you know, the university was going to be a secular university. We hear secular and we take that to mean anti-religious.

But Jefferson didn't mean anti-religious. He meant not an established religion. And actually, you know, he had a little bit of arm twisting, you say, but he certainly saw that there would be a place for religion at the table at UVA.

And he never was in his mind that I'm making some pantheon to learning that is going to bracket out religion somehow because, of course, in the 18th century, virtually no one conceived of an intellectual enterprise that could have even done that if they wanted to. So just talk about what Thomas Jefferson's vision was for the University of Virginia and what you think he accomplished there. Yeah, I mean, you know, you don't want to go again to one extreme or the other with UVA.

I mean, it does make a change in the history of American higher education. Right. We're almost everything was, at least in large part, training ministers.

Right, right. And there, you know, there would be ministers who trained at UVA, but it was a more natural fit to go to a more denominational college. And, you know, quoting Hampton Sydney or something, something like that in Virginia.

And UVA is one of the first sort of recognizably state universities in the country in the sense that it's serving more of a kind of general public good rather than just the need for

ministers in particular denominations. And it's not going to have a chapel. So that's important.

But when you look at the details of what they're studying, it's still a deeply, you know, classical Christian education. And so they're studying Latin and Greek and the classics and they're assumed to be able to read, for instance, the Greek New Testament, which Jefferson did regularly as an adult. This is what you do as an educated gentleman in Virginia in the 18 teens and twenties.

And so when you look at what is actually going on at UVA, as you suggested, it would be very difficult. It would be so unfamiliar culturally and educationally at the time to have what we would recognize as a secular education, which is an education where there is a secular education. Where there is no reference to theology or God or Christian ethics or something like that.

And it's just not what Jefferson is trying to do. If you said that he was trying to create a non-denominational college, I think that that's much more accurate about what he's doing. Although he even under some pressure invited the various Protestant denominations in Virginia to have sort of houses of study and have an official kind of on campus presence like that.

Although none of them took up his offer, I think partly because Presbyterians in particular were just deeply suspicious about what Jefferson grew up to at UVA. And so again, you know, it's a lot of traditional Christians were skeptical about the UVA project, but it is overstated about how secular or especially anti-Christian it was. So, I'll try to give you a good wrap up question here.

We've talked for an hour and we haven't even talked about the thing for which Jefferson is most famous for most of us, and that is the Declaration of Independence. And there's a whole lot of books on that as well. And, you know, even within Jefferson's lifetime, some were saying, "There's too much about rights." And now there's, as you know, Tommy, you probably follow some of the same things I do.

There's a very live conversation and it's not new, but it's, you know, is the, are the Declaration and the Constitution doing the same sort of thing? Or are they really, you know, is the Declaration more this Lockean individualistic rights and the Constitution is more nationalistic and communitarianism? Or how does Jefferson's declaration and his view on rights from Locke and Montesquieu and the Scottish Enlightenment, how does that jive with also the strand of civic republicanism? There's all these debates in our day and they can be traced back 250 years. But my question for you, and you can hit on any of that or none of that, is to ask, okay, we see the inconsistency. And that's a euphemism.

We see the contradictions in Jefferson and at points in his life, just moral turpitude. And

we have to acknowledge that. And yet he's, he's on the Mount Rushmore, literally, and for most Americans, at least occupying some of that conceptual space.

And if you had to make the case for Jefferson's greatness, not dismissing, but, you know, looking square in the face, these inconsistencies and instances of moral evil, how would you make the case for Jefferson as a great American and somebody to be celebrated? I mean, I think I would go in the direction. I'm not sure that we would want to celebrate him personally. Right.

But I do think that there is great good that has come out of his legacy. I think that's how I would put it. And one of them is the legacy of religious celebrity.

And again, it was not rigid secularism. I mean, you think of John Leeland coming and preaching and Congress and the president being there in attendance. It was not an absence of religion, but it was the idea that religion will do best when the government gets out of the business of religion.

And that's the genius of the American settlement on religious celebrity. And I think that that has resulted in great good. And then, you know, most obviously is his idea of equality by our common creation, by God, has been the most powerful statement of human equality in world history.

And been used for great good, not least by figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. And so, you know, King in particular was, you know, deeply aware of the problematic aspects of Jefferson and particularly with slavery. And yet, he is able to appropriate the legacy because of the power of Jefferson's ideas. And the beauty of the way that he articulated this ideal of human equality by our common creation by God.

And he says that that's America's creed. And so, you know, I think that in a way, I mean, we say that we celebrate Martin Luther King's legacy, but I think he actually sets an example that would be something of a corrective to our culture. And being able to appreciate and even admire great things about Jefferson's intellectual and political legacy, while certainly not endorsing a lot of things about the way that that Jefferson lived. And I think that somewhere in there is the right kind of wise sober, moderate, which is so hard to be moderated in American culture today, but, but the sensible historical view that, you know, not, you know, just kind of canceling everybody who did things wrong, but, but, you know, sitting with the contradiction, and with the, you know, deep problems with somebody like Jefferson, which I do think are more extreme than average.

Right. But, but also appreciating that the legacy of Jefferson has been used for great good in American and world history and just being able to sit with those kind of tensions and contradictions. I think is a, is a more mature healthy approach to history than a lot of what we do in our kind of iconoclastic age.

Yeah, that's a great summary. So I'll let you have the last word Tommy thanks for coming on again Thomas Jefferson a biography of spirit and flesh I encourage people to go out and get it just came out recently and then, you know, follow your, your, your links on whatever site you're on listeners and I'll let you the other good things that Tommy's written other good biographies and other good in his newsletter as well. So thank you and blessings on the move and hope you enjoy your 4th of July and blowing something up in honor of our country's birthday this weekend.

Thank you Kevin. Good to be with you and to all of our listeners I hope to see you I guess I won't see you but I hope you can be back and join with me and our guests. Probably at the end of the summer and until then, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read good book.

[Music] [Silence]