

Jefferson's Bible gets a second look

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WASHINGTON (RNS) How would you feel about taking a razor blade to a Bible?

Thomas Jefferson, apparently, didn't have any qualms about it.

In his retirement, the nation's third president carried out a project he had contemplated for years: he literally cut and pasted passages from the four Gospels into one integrated narrative of Jesus' life -- minus the miracles and supernatural events.

The result, he said, was "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man." Judging by the wear and tear on the book, it appears Jefferson read it regularly.

Known as "The Jefferson Bible," the 84-page patchwork book is on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History here through May 28, 2012. Smithsonian Books has released a commemorative full-color edition, and Tarcher/Penguin is publishing a pocket-size version in January.

The exhibit is the first time the book has been shown publicly since it underwent a meticulous conservation process. When the pages were removed from the binding for treatment, they were also photographed, so that the entire book can now be viewed in high-resolution digital images on the museum's website.

Curator Harry Rubenstein said the book can be controversial, but it depends on how you look at it.

"It's either a statement that strips out the divinity of Jesus ... or it's a distillation of his moral philosophy," Rubenstein said.

Jefferson cut passages from six different Bibles, in English, French, Latin and Greek. He left behind any elements that he could not support through reason or that he believed were later embellishments, including the Resurrection.

The politician in Jefferson well understood the scandal that such a project could cause. He kept it secret until his death in 1826, although he confided his religious views in contemporaries such as John Adams and Benjamin Rush, a signer of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

A champion of religious freedom and the father of the American tradition of "separation of church and state," Jefferson was denounced as an anti-Christian and an atheist by political opponents throughout his career.

The accusations were unfounded, scholars say. In 1803, two years after taking office, Jefferson said, "I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other."

"Jefferson's basically a deist," said Joseph Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian at Mount Holyoke College. "(He) thinks that Jesus is really a neat guy -- like Socrates; we can learn a lot from him. But he's not the Son of God."

Ellis noted that he has experienced a lot of resistance from those who don't wish to see one of the leading Founding Fathers as anything other than a devout Christian.

Ellis, who added a page on Jefferson's religious views to the Encyclopedia Britannica, said, "I can't tell you how many hits I've gotten. I've got thousands of people trying to kill me, you know?"

The reaction reflects a trend among politicians and pundits to try to draft Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers into contemporary culture wars.

For instance, last year conservative broadcaster Glenn Beck hosted historian David Barton to talk about the Founding Fathers. Barton is the founder of WallBuilders, a conservative group that aims "to educate the public concerning the periods in our country's history when its laws and policies were firmly rooted in biblical principles."

On the show, Barton argued that most of the Founding Fathers were more devout than people tend to think they were. Jefferson, for example, signed his presidential documents with the words "in the year of our Lord Christ," he said, and in 1800 started holding church services in the U.S. Capitol.

On the other hand, atheists have recently tried to claim Jefferson as one of their own. In a park in a Santa Monica, Calif., a display was set up this year alongside rival Nativity scenes that quotes Jefferson: "Religions are all alike -- founded upon fables and mythologies."

Ellis said Jefferson, like most of the Founding Fathers, was not a devout Christian. George Washington was "a lukewarm Episcopalian" and James Madison was "sort of like Jefferson," he said. "(Alexander) Hamilton was sort of an agnostic until the end, when his son got shot in a duel, and then he started to become a Christian."

So which was he, Christian hero or skeptical heretic? Even Jefferson himself seemed to have trouble answering the question: "I am of a sect by myself," he once said, "as far as I know."