

TJ AND THE SURFACE RADICALS

Protecting UU Credibility

Tom Kinney

October 22, 2000

Have you heard the news? The Thomas Jefferson district of the Unitarian Universalist organization is considering changing the name of their district. Thomas Jefferson is considered by some as unworthy of the honor. Theology by the wayside for the moment—this is a secular issue. And, for an organization that may be concerned about its historic reputation for leadership, built upon solid principles, falling prey to tumbling credibility and accusations of extremism, it requires thought.

So, let's think about it. Jefferson unworthy of the honor. Now, that's radical by any historian's measure. Unworthy because of his relation to slavery. To me, that's surface radicalism. Since this is a religious talk, I'll say: "God forbid—yet another label". Pray tell what is a surface radical?

Well, I just made it up to help explain the concept and concern of an affliction that seems to have infected our society over the last forty years or so. And maybe longer—but that exceeds my first-hand knowledge. Allow me to explain surface radicalism by example, starting with an extreme, then moving toward the more subtle.

Ransom E. Olds offered his first automobile for sale in 1903. His runabout was a design leader at the time. It did not have a laminated tempered glass windshield nor did it have airbags in the steering wheel. It was unsafe and should never have been allowed on the roads.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD HAVE STOPPED HIM!!

You laugh. But in the mid-sixties, when I was getting my masters at Purdue, a PhD physicist took me severely to task as I was a representative of the devil—I mean, the automotive industry (after all, I had worked four summers for GM). He stated that the technology and materials were in place to utilize laminated tempered glass in the late 1800's. All automobiles should have used it. Laminated tempered glass breaks into non-aggressive shards and stays in place in accidents. He couldn't make the leap of putting the issue in the context of the times. Those early car builders struggled with the basic problems of stop and go, the cars ran poorly and stopped worse. I label my physicist friend a surface radical because he did not look sufficiently below the surface before condemning and proselytizing. By the way, R. E. Olds' 1903 unsafe runabout without a laminated windshield and steering wheel air bag, had no windshield at all and was steered by a tiller, sealing my physicist friend's surface radical fate.

A second example comes from the '90's and concerns the very noteworthy rise in childhood asthma. The work of the National Academy of Sciences reports indoor contaminants as the likely cause. Further research led to "Cleaning the Air: Asthma and Indoor Air Exposures" by the National Academy's Institute of Medicine. It makes a

compelling case that indoor air pollutants, such as insect remains and molds, are the primary culprit. Although not absolutely conclusive, it found “strong, causal evidence linking common indoor substances to the development or worsening of asthma symptoms in susceptible people”. Several other studies have reinforced these conclusions blaming sealed buildings and recent lifestyle changes, stating “most people spend as much as ninety percent of their time indoors”. So, where are the surface radicals on this issue?

The EPA ran into trouble promoting its next round of ozone and particulate regulations which will promote Mother Nature to number one polluter in many more regions where that is not already so. EPA Administrator Carol Browner switched to emotional arguments claiming the new rules would prevent “hundreds of thousands of cases...in children of aggravated asthma”. She ignored that, during the period of time the childhood asthmatic and mortality cases has doubled, the ozone and particulate levels have substantially declined. To quote an unnamed presidential candidate promoting the same, “60,000 fewer asthma attacks in children, and more than 4,000 fewer premature deaths.” Wow! Now we are inventing exact numbers to save the asthmatic children by actions having no relation to the cause. Loss of credibility is the pit at the end of the surface radical road.

The California Air Research Board is now scrambling to provide cover for these statements. You’ll likely see something on this in the media shortly.

Surface radicalism is not an issue of support or opposition to slavery. Surface radicalism is not about support of or opposition to automobile safety standards or appropriate power generating plant emissions controls. A surface radical is an activist, a would-be thought leader, who has NOT done his or her homework. This is not compatible with the protection of UU credibility.

Returning to the primary focus of today’s discussion, is the removal of Thomas Jefferson from the name of our UU district an example of surface radicalism? I make the accusation that it is. And here is why.

Thomas Jefferson was a complex and complicated man in a complex and complicated time. He was a principal in the formation of a government that was to grow to a super-power in the world, based considerably on his concepts of its foundation. Jefferson was the prime architect and visionary that defined the geographic boundaries of the United States. Jefferson was the strong personality and skilled politician that brought the colonies together in the focus on the primacy of the individual and subservience of the government.

Subservience of the government? Some of us may not be sure he was wholly successful on that one.

Jefferson was fully aware that he needed to retain the respect of all segments of the leadership of all the states. He could not risk being branded a radical, although much of his thinking was extremely progressive as he laid out the path to our future.

I want to emphasize that—the path to OUR FUTURE. In many of Thomas Jefferson’s writings, he states that he is currently unable to get agreement, however, he was confident such agreement would come in subsequent generations. Some of his political battles focused on setting a path to an end result—the end result not being politically attainable at the moment. Jefferson was a visionary, yet a prudent leader.

The District said renaming was because of the predatory relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings and the fact that Thomas Jefferson did not free all of his slaves, either in his lifetime or in his will. His theological philosophies, various other contributions, were not mentioned. I label this surface radicalism.

Let’s deal with the Sally Hemmings issue first. Jefferson was a widower in Paris in 1787 and away from his seven-year-old daughter, Polly, for two years. Polly had been living with the Eppes family, her maternal aunt and uncle. She did not want to leave her cousins and go to France and had to be tricked into going onboard ship. Jefferson had expected a mature woman to accompany his daughter. Instead, a fourteen-year-old slave girl, Sally Hemmings, was sent as Polly’s companion. Sally’s brother was already with Jefferson in Paris.

Polly was met in England by Abigail Adams to whom she became so attached during her three-week stay with the Adams that she had to be pried away. Jefferson failed to meet his fatherly commitment to meet Polly in England. Instead, he sent a French servant. Polly did not recognize either her father or her sister when she finally arrived in Paris, however, within the year, she was settled in and speaking French. As for Sally, Abigail Adams described her as a “good-natured child”. Some writers claim Sally became Jefferson’s mistress while in Paris, although no mention of her exists in any of Jefferson’s, or anyone else’s, writings at the time. Those writers claim as proof that Jefferson purchased clothes in Paris for Sally. As his daughter’s companion, this would be expected and were likely purchased concurrently with those for Polly. Abigail did the same for both Polly and Sally in London. All returned from Paris to Monticello in 1789.

The preponderance of evidence indicates Sally Hemmings’ six children were fathered by Thomas Jefferson. The oldest, Eston Hemmings, has been confirmed by DNA testing as a descendant of the Jefferson family. The Jefferson Foundation at Monticello has collaborated in the study reporting no oral or written history postulates that Sally’s children were by a variety of fathers nor do the records show a sequence of opportunities for any other Jefferson family member other than Thomas to have been Sally’s lover.

The range of possibilities regarding the Hemmings-Jefferson relationship include that Thomas Jefferson indeed sexually preyed upon Sally Hemmings, taking full and unrefusable advantage of his master-slave relationship. The opposite possibility could be that Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson were husband and wife, in their own minds, within the constraints of their environment.

What was that relationship? First, Eston was conceived in early December of 1794, when Sally was 21 or 22 years old and five years after the return from Paris. Sally's last child was conceived in mid-September, 1809, fifteen years later. Jefferson's age at these reference points was 51 and 66 respectively. Jefferson died sixteen years after the last child's birth at age 84. What do we make of this thirty-year age difference?

My great-grandfather was 58 and his wife 24 when their first was born. Their last was born when he was 72. What can we conclude from this 34-year age difference? Not much more than a likely poor market for Viagra in both of these families.

The length of the Hemmings-Jefferson liaison leans toward commitment and consensuality rather than subjugation, but does not prove it. Jefferson's writing at the time expressed his recognition of the difficulty of integrating the two races—a problem we are still dealing with today. Jefferson freed his children by Sally. Jefferson's overseer stated Sally's children were light colored and had skills and that was one of the criteria Jefferson used for those decisions, although not exclusively. Some of Eston's descendants did not acknowledge their black heredity.

Let's assume for the moment an intense and long-lasting love affair existed between Sally and Tom. Imagine the marriage of the century on top of the Jefferson mountain at Monticello in 1794. It would have been a great Unitarian wedding. Imagine the discussions from Boston to Savannah of the about-to-be Vice President Thomas Jefferson's decision to make Sally his wife. Imagine the impact on Thomas Jefferson's influence on his pursuit of his vision for America. Did Thomas and Sally sacrifice the acknowledgement of their relationship for those reasons? The record does not tell us one way or the other.

Hollywood showed us a slave girl, Sally, cowering before her master. They have no more data to go on than the historians. Folks who believe what they see in the movies may think they know the answer. But then, Hollywood has never been shy with imagination, and occasionally peddling it as fact. The surface radical may go to the movies, apply his twenty-first century perspective, and promptly put his credibility at risk. We need to be careful about doing the same.

The second reason given for eliminating TJ from the district name is that Thomas Jefferson did not free all his slaves, either in his lifetime or in his will. This is true. A twenty-first century surface radical may say, "Aha! An unworthy scoundrel!" Jefferson's attitudes about equality, slavery and the races were not twenty-first century, but they were way ahead of most of his eighteenth century peers.

Jefferson was studying law under George Wythe when he reached his majority and inherited, according to his father's will, 2650 acres and 22 slaves. In 1774, Tom's wife inherited 11,000 acres and 135 slaves not long before she died. In 1790, Jefferson gave his daughter, Martha, 1000 acres of land and 27 slaves. However much Jefferson disapproved of slavery, by transferring the ownership of these slaves to his daughter and her descendants, Jefferson was helping to perpetuate the system he deplored.

When Jefferson made a census of his slaves in 1794, he totaled 105 in Albermarle County and 49 in Bedford County. The crop system employed reveals that a large portion of the farm production went to sustain those who lived there. he invested in spinning and weaving machinery that could produce the 2000 yards of linen, cotton, and woolen cloth that he needed yearly to clothe his “family” –in which he included his slaves. Slavery sustained Jefferson’s comfortable lifestyle, and he employed an unusually large number of slaves in household duties and as craftsmen. But he never grew wealthy on slave labor. Nonetheless, he did at times sell slaves to pay his creditors.

With each passing year, Jefferson’s financial situation—like his health—continued to deteriorate. In the final year of his life, it was exacerbated by the bankruptcy of his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., which left him to provide for all the expenses of his daughter and his unmarried grandchildren. Land prices had dropped severely and he petitioned the state to permit a land lottery to pay his debts in hopes of saving his residence, Monticello. Only then did he learn that Monticello would have to be included to pay his debts, although he was granted permission to live there for what was to be his remaining months.

Under these conditions, he made his will on March 16, 1826. The state of his finances ruled out a provision in his will for the emancipation of his slaves, had he been so inclined, but there is no indication that such a step had ever been his intention.

If we wanted to know his thoughts on racism and slavery in the eighteenth century, we might gather around him with a crowd, asking questions, and when he begins to speak, we holler, “Hear him! Hear him!”, signaling all others to silence in the style of the times. So, let us transport ourselves back in time and attitudes and listen to the man in his environment.

In a case in 1770, he argued that “under the law of nature, all men are born free, every one comes into the world with a right to his own person, which includes the liberty of moving and using it at his own will.” The case involved a man whose grandmother was a mulatto and who was subject to servitude until age thirty-one, according to a 1705 law. She gave birth to his mother before she reached freedom, who, in turn, gave birth to the son before the mother reached freedom. The man sought release from servitude before that age. Jefferson pleaded his case with no fee, arguing the 1705 law “subjected to servitude the first mulatto only. That this did not, under the law of nature, affect the liberty of the children. Because, under that law we are all born free.” It took the act of 1723 to subject such children to servitude, he pointed out, and, with no hiding of his own convictions, concluded that “it remains for some future legislature, if any shall be found wicked enough, to extend it to the grandchildren and other issue more remote.” The court ruled against his client.

Jefferson actually spent more time in 1776 on the Virginia Constitution than the Declaration of Independence. Where the Virginia Declaration of Rights, drafted by George Mason and approved by the Virginia convention, emphasized religious freedom,

Jefferson's proposal went further to state that no person "be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious institution." He also drafted a provision to prohibit the importation of slaves into Virginia—a proposal that the convention did not accept, though his condemnation of George III for allowing the slave trade to continue was retained in the preamble. He was ahead of his peers on the slavery issue and found he needed to be patient and protect his credibility.

Jefferson wrote, "all men are created equal" and stated his belief that all men were born free and that slavery was contrary to the law of nature. Unenlightened monarchs and wicked legislatures might allow slavery to exist. Such acts could be revoked or repealed, as he fully expected the laws regarding slavery would be in the course of time.

In expectation of a 1783 constitutional convention, Jefferson drafted an amendment of emancipation containing a provision that all persons born after December 31, 1800, would be free under the assumption that a future commitment binding a future generation would be less threatening. The amendment was never introduced. He said, "it was found that the public mind would not yet bear the proposition." The 1783 constitutional convention didn't happen. In his "Notes on Virginia", he proposed emancipation and deportation, which rested on an assumption of innate racial differences. Jefferson believed at the time of the Revolution, as he did in old age, that "nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free". But he also was convinced that it was no less certain that "the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government".

We might note here that Abraham Lincoln came to a like conclusion during the Civil War, proposed it to the Black leadership at the time, and was surprised at the soundness of its rejection. Ahead of his time on emancipation, Jefferson was very much a product of his age in his views on race. Ready to make allowances for differences of condition, education, conversation, and the sphere in which slaves moved, Jefferson still subscribed to the theory of black inferiority. He advanced the theory as a "suspicion", but most of his arguments tended to support that suspicion.

It is argued by historians that Jefferson's suspicion of black inferiority was the only means by which he could deal psychologically with his own sense of guilt in owning slaves. John C. Miller points out, Jefferson could never have lived with the thought that white Americans might be denying opportunity to a black Isaac Newton, a black Francis Bacon, or a black John Locke. To the twenty-first century mind, Jefferson's views on race stand in contrast to the liberal stance that he took on most of the major issues of his day, yet his repeated condemnation of the institution of slavery and his insistent arguments that steps must be taken to bring it to an end placed him in advance of most eighteenth century persons.

He continually condemned statesmen for "permitting one-half of the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other" which Jefferson described as a system destroying the morals of society. "Gods...justice can not sleep forever." He said he thought "a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is

abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.”

By the end of his life, hope would be replaced by growing despair, but he never wavered in his conviction that slavery was an evil that must be extinguished.

Jefferson’s committee report on western states (bordering on the Mississippi) became the basis of the Ordinance of 1784. This document prohibited slavery in these regions after 1800 and failed to be enacted. Returning as the Ordinance of 1787, prohibiting slavery only north of the Ohio River, it was put in place, not without strong objection. We’ll come back to the Ordinance of 1787, because this is where it gets personal.

During the early 1780’s is when Jefferson was writing his book, “Notes on Virginia”. he took the manuscript with him when he relocated to Paris, but very reluctantly showed it to a good friend under the condition that it not be copied. He wrote: “It is possible that (early release) might produce an irritation which would indispose the people towards the two great objects I have in view, that is the emancipation of their slaves, and the settlement of their constitution on a firmer and more permanent basis.” His intent was to indoctrinate the young toward change by supplying copies to every student. “It is to them I look, to the rising generation, and not to the one now in power for these great reformations.” Jefferson was highly sensitive to the public attitudes and very cognizant of getting so far ahead of progress on this issue that the “irritation” would do more damage than good. He was indeed manipulating our destiny—aware of what we would now call “backlash”.

In his final years, his optimism left him. “This momentous question (slavery), like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror,” he wrote. “I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence.” That was in 1826. Six months before his death, with John Quincy Adams in the White House, he wrote, “with the deepest affliction, the rapid strides with which the federal branch of our government is advancing towards the usurpation of all the rights reserved to the States, and the consolidation in itself of all powers, foreign and domestic and that, too, by constructions which, if legitimate, leave no limits to their power.” To the end, he was a small government proponent. He would be appalled at today’s situation.

I mentioned that the Ordinance of 1787, outlining the pattern of expansion of the United States, is where this issue of Jefferson and slavery gets personal. Permit me to explain.

Among Jefferson’s friends in Virginia was a young man named James Lemen. Jefferson knew his father well and watched young James during his early years develop into a strong and resourceful young man. James, in turn, looked up to Jefferson and was guided by his concepts and aspirations. Jefferson began to discuss the future of the “West” with James when the “West” stopped at the Mississippi.

Both Virginians were strongly anti-slavery. There developed between them what was called the Jefferson-Lemen pact that was formalized, in secret, in May, 1784, in Annapolis, as Jefferson prepared to depart for France. Illness kept James from immediately moving on the objectives of the pact. When Jefferson heard of the delay and sickness, his confidential agent sought out Lemen on December 28, 1785, to give him \$100 to assist in his recovery and relocation of his family to the western territories. James Lemen's mission was to assure that slavery did not get a foothold in the area that was to become Illinois. Another emissary was active in the Indiana area and later in Missouri and was shot for his efforts.

As previously stated, the Ordinance of 1784 prohibiting slavery in the western territories failed to be enacted. The sparseness of the population, less than a few hundred, gave no local voice to the issues. However, the Ordinance of 1787 was enacted, prohibiting slavery north of the Ohio—but it was not enforced. In fact, the battle began shortly to repeal the anti-slavery provision in the ordinance. James Lemen was front and center in that battle by 1790, through the Baptist Church at New Design, Illinois Territory, that he founded. He chose the name “New Design” as a vision of his intentions for a fresh start. By 1800, New Design was the largest settlement in “the west” at about eight hundred souls. Three years later, Jefferson moved “the West” with the Louisiana Purchase—it was no longer the eastern shore of the Mississippi, but the eastern shore of the Pacific.

By 1808, James Lemen and his sons had founded a string of Baptist churches, but were losing the anti-slavery battle in those very churches. In consultation with then-president Jefferson, Lemen made the bold move of splitting away from his churches and beginning, in 1809, a new Baptist Church with the tag name, Friends of Humanity, requiring anti-slavery sentiments to join. President Jefferson, meanwhile, had been frustrating every attempt to bring the bill repealing the anti-slavery provision of the Ordinance of 1787 to a vote in Congress. Lemen's new churches were more successful than the originals and his sons growing more influential as well.

By the time of the Illinois Constitutional Convention in 1817, the battle to determine the state's destiny on slavery was in full swing. The Lemen churches embarked on a massive anti-slavery letter writing and petition drive on a federal level.

James Lemen, Jr., eventually became a state senator. Any further thought of repeal of the anti-slavery provision in the Ordinance of 1787 was dropped. James Lemen, Jr. became a confidant of Abraham Lincoln, frequently discussing these very issues into the wee hours of what they both called their Wednesday night philosophical talks. Occasional third party participants reported they were encouraged to take their leave early so the two could continue in confidence.

Why this interest in the Jefferson-Lemen pact concerning Illinois? Two of James Lemen Sr.'s children married Kinneys and Kinneys were Lemen's primary supporters—and antagonists. Joseph Lemen's wife, Mary Kinney, was a driving force in the Bethel Baptist church, an underground railway station across from my great-grandfather's farm.

James Lemen, Jr., assumed the senate seat from Mary's brother, William Kinney, when that Kinney became Lt. Governor of Illinois, a pro-slavery slave owner. Can you imagine the political discussions at their family Fourth of July picnics—no fireworks needed!

On July 4, 1826, at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson died.

Jefferson is the reason we have a country that stretches coast to coast. He is the reason we have a federal/state form of government with checks and balances on its power. He is the reason equality and freedom are a founding principal of the United States. And he is the reason slavery stopped at the Ohio.

For our one-issue surface radicals, they are invited to imagine our country stopping at the Mississippi. Consider a federal government, unrestrained by checks and balances and dominant over any and all wishes of the states. Consider the Civil War, if it were to have happened in a United States of half our current size, with Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky soundly in the Confederacy. Who would have supplied the Abraham Lincoln?

Our one-issue surface radicals seem focused on reasons, all too frequently poorly researched, to drive us apart—distinguish the “good guys” from the “bad guys”. They should be reminded that all of us are both “good guys” and “bad guys”, the surface radicals included, making us all kin in this family of humanity. Balance needs to return. The rhetoric of division and degradation needs to stop.

Considering the removal from the UU district name of the great thinker, philosopher, statesman, and strategist, Unitarian Thomas Jefferson, the founder of public education and our primary early force behind equality for all, doesn't stand up to scrutiny. It diverts our focus and risks our UU credibility.

My vision of the secular side of UUism is that we are bigger than the one-issue proponents. My vision of UU members is that they will not tolerate surface radicalism to become the general perception of the denomination. My vision of UU's future is one of building bridges between conflicting points of view, encouraging research and dialogue to establish a path to that future, and providing leadership down that path at a pace that brings the majority with us. Radicalization of UUism may place us in an unworthy future—all alone.