

# Thomas Jefferson's Religious Beliefs

Post by “Don” of January 28, 2022 at 5:17 PM

Thanks for the link, [Kalosyni](#) , to the article on Jefferson's beliefs.

I have any number of problems with Thomas Jefferson and remain ambivalent with regards to him. He's never been one of my favorite Founders (I'm more a Franklin fan). I've also never been entirely comfortable with his image being in the header to this forum, but that is entirely [Cassius](#) 's call.

I don't believe Jefferson was entirely an Epicurean, but I'm sure he found facets of the philosophy with which he agreed. He was also enamored with Jesus as a philosopher since he created what came to be known as [The Jefferson Bible](#). He also praises [Epictetus](#) in a number of places including:

## Quote

In morality read Epictetus, Xenophontis memorabilia, Plato's Socratic dialogues, Cicero's philosophies.

So, I think Jefferson's "I am an Epicurean" should best be understood as only a part of his philosophical outlook, which appears to me to be quite eclectic if syncretic (to use last week's Word of Week 😊 ). As any "gentleman" of the 18th century, he was widely read in ancient Greek and Latin authors. He peppers excerpts from Horace, Cicero, and others throughout his diaries and letters. [Later in his life \(1803\)](#), he wrote:

## Quote

I should first take a general view of the moral doctrines of the most remarkable of the ancient philosophers, of whose ethics we have sufficient information to make an estimate: say of Pythagoras, [Epicurus](#), Epictetus, Socrates, Cicero, Seneca, Antoninus. I should do justice to the branches of morality they have treated well but *point out the importance of those in which they are deficient.* (emphasis added)

Granted, his letter to Short was in 1819, so \*maybe\* his affinity toward Epicurus grew since 1803. BUT, as [Kalosyni](#) 's link shows, he was saying things like this in 1823:

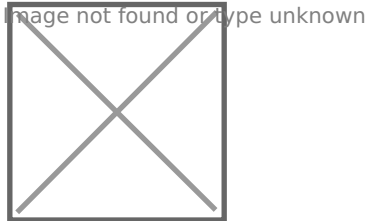
## Quote

"[T]he truth is that the greatest enemies to the doctrines of Jesus are those calling themselves the expositors of them, who have perverted them for the structure of a system of fancy absolutely incomprehensible, and without any foundation in his

genuine words."

He as still defending Jesus against his "greatest enemies" and was not fully committed in any way to an Epicurean path.

For reference, here is a link to the National Archives collection of Jefferson's papers where the term epicur\* occurs (i.e., Epicure, Epicurean, Epicurus, etc.):



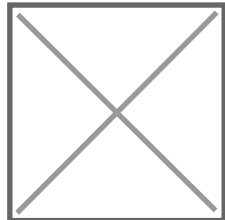
[Founders Online: Search](#)

founders.archives.gov

and simply epicurean

<https://founders.archives.gov/index.xqy?q=Pr...=1511211111&r=1> (includes Short letter)

and here are Short's letters to Jefferson:



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