

Secularists for Jesus

“Jefferson, Emerson, and Jesus” by Richard Wightman Fox, in *Raritan* (Fall 2002), Rutgers Univ., 31 Mine St., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

What a strange dance the religious and the secular do in America! “Just as religious faith has been molded by secular commitments, so secular faith has been shaped by religious loyalties,” observes Fox, a historian at the University of Southern California. A prominent case in point: the beliefs of Thomas Jefferson and the Transcendentalist poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In the early 19th century, when Baptist and Methodist evangelism was at flood tide, these two leading anti-clerical secularizers claimed, in effect, that they were only following in the footsteps of someone greater—Jesus himself, pre-eminent sage and teacher.

“I am a Christian,” Jefferson (1743–1826) wrote during his first term as president, “in the only sense in which [Jesus] wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to him every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other.”

Running for reelection in 1804, and “again under attack as a French-leaning infidel,” says Fox, “he let friends circulate the news that he wished to ground the republic upon the wisdom of Jesus—purged of the supernatural accre-

tions that had piled up over the centuries of ‘mystery-mongering’ by the churches.” In 1820, in retirement at Monticello, Jefferson recovered the “authentic” Jesus: “He simply took scissors to the Scriptures, removing any passage that implied or claimed that Jesus was divine, and pasting what remained into a blank book bound in red Morocco leather.”

For Emerson (1803–1882), writing in the 1830s and 1840s, when many Americans had become disenchanted with Jeffersonian rationalism, there was no wall of separation between divinity and humanity. “God was within each person not as an ingrained moral sense (Jefferson’s belief), and not as a personal spirit (the claim of many Christians),” writes Fox, “but as the ever flowing source of one’s self-renewal.”

In Emerson’s view, the veneration of Jesus was keeping people from imitating his quest for the divine within. He persuaded many Protestants “that they could become more deeply religious by becoming more secular, more truly devoted to Jesus by abandoning the conventional worship of him,” says Fox. For Emerson and Jefferson, as for the preachers they opposed, Jesus remained indispensable.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The Dangerous Indoors

“Indoor Air Pollution: The Quiet Killer” by Vinod Mishra, Robert D. Retherford, and Kirk R. Smith, in *AsiaPacific Issues* No. 63 (Oct. 2002), East-West Center, 1601 East-West Rd., Honolulu, Hawaii 96848–1601.

Indoor air pollution in homes and offices may seem like the last frontier of environmental improvement in the West, but in the poorer nations it is, or ought to be, a frontline health issue. That’s because so many people—nearly half the world’s households—use wood, animal dung, and other unprocessed biomass fuels for their cooking and heating. Long-term exposure to the smoke “contributes to respiratory illness, lung cancer, and blindness,” according to the authors, who are researchers at the East-West Center in Honolulu. Worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, indoor air pol-

lution ranks fifth as a risk factor for ill health—behind malnutrition, AIDS, tobacco use, and poor water and sanitation.

It’s not entirely clear how smoke causes all this harm. It can contain many different potentially harmful compounds, from carbon monoxide to benzo[a]pyrene, which can suppress the immune system. Particulate matter “has been shown to induce a systemic inflammatory response.”

If the precise causes are difficult to specify, the effects are not. In India, where millions are afflicted by tuberculosis, a 1992–93 survey of