

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



A cloud of smoke swirls around a Mexican woman cooking a meal in Chiapas.

some 89,000 households found that adults were 2.6 times more likely to suffer from active TB in homes where the cooking was done with wood or dung than in homes where cleaner fuels were used. In India's rural areas, cooking smoke is blamed for three-fifths of all TB cases. A Mexican study produced similar results.

The India survey also showed that women in households using biomass fuels were 27 percent more likely to be partially or completely blind.

In India alone, according to the authors, several hundred thousand women and children die prematurely each year because of indoor air pollution.

Health education and stepped-up efforts to supply rural folk with better cookstoves could reduce the impact of indoor air pollution, the authors say. But ultimately, only economic development—creating, ironically, Western-style outdoor air pollution—will do the trick.

Why Drugs Cost So Much

"America's Other Drug Problem" by Arnold S. Relman and Marcia Angell, in *The New Republic* (Dec. 16, 2002), 1331 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

To hear the pharmaceutical industry tell it, the sky-high prices for brand-name prescription drugs merely reflect the high costs of discovering and developing new treatments for disease. And the huge net profits the firms make are a necessary incentive for the risky and arduous research they undertake. Baloney! say Relman and Angell, both former editors in chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Big drug companies spend far more on marketing and advertising than they do on research and development (R&D), the authors point out. The industry's trade asso-

ciation reports that its member firms in the United States and abroad spend about \$30 billion on R&D annually—less than half their reported expenditures on marketing and administration. (Prescription drugs are a \$170 billion business, accounting for more than 10 percent of health care spending.) And despite all their expenses, the 10 American drug firms on the 2001 *Fortune* 500 list had an average net return on revenues of 18.5 percent—compared with a median net return for other industries of only 3.3 percent. Drug prices "could be lowered substantially," Relman and Angell