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Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

The Private Jefferson

*JEFFERSON'S SECRETS:
Death and Desire at Monticello.*

By Andrew Burstein.
Basic Books. 351 pp. \$25

Reviewed by Christopher Hitchens

It is arguably a good thing—and in no way detracts from Andrew Burstein's absorbing book—that *Jefferson's Secrets* does not quite live up to its title. Secrecy, death, and desire are the ingredients of the sensational, even of the violent, and they consort ill with the measure and scruple for which Thomas Jefferson is still renowned. It might be better to say that this study is an inquiry into the privacy and reticence of a very self-contained man, along with an educated speculation upon the motives and promptings for his defensive style.

Celebrated for many paradoxes, Jefferson was especially notable as a revolutionary who believed above all in order. Often ardent in his partisanship for rebellion in America and France (though somewhat less so when it came to slave revolts in Haiti and the Old South), he could seem airy and promiscuous with regard to violence. Indeed, he rather commended the Whiskey Rebellion as something desirable for its own sake—"like a storm in the atmosphere." Yet this expression in itself furnishes us with a clue. The outbreak of insurrection, like a storm, was necessary to restore normality by relieving unnatural pressure. The wisdom of nature had provided such outlets precisely in order to forestall, or to correct, what Jefferson was wont to

call—always pejoratively—"convulsions."

Burstein, a professor of history at the University of Tulsa, acutely makes the connection between what men of the Enlightenment considered "the body politic" and what they thought about bodily health. Here, the maxim *Mens sana in corpore sano* was taken very seriously. Excess was to be avoided, in diet and in matters sexual, but so too was undue repression or continence. A true philosophe ought



Thomas Jefferson was 78 and in seclusion on his Virginia estate when Thomas Sully painted this portrait in 1821.

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to spend as much time in exercise and labor as he did with books and papers. He should emulate the balance and symmetry of nature. He should be careful about what he put into his system, and cautious about any fluid disbursements from it.

As president, Jefferson began to suffer intermittently from diarrhea (which he at first cured by what seems the counterintuitive method of hard horseback riding), and though he was unusually hale until his 80th year, it was diarrhea and a miserable infection of the urinary tract that eventually carried him off. In one of his few profitless speculations, Burstein quotes a letter from one of Jefferson's physicians, Dr. Thomas Watkins (whose middle name was Cassaway), in which gonorrhea is mentioned as a possible cause of the persistent dysuria. It seems plain from the context that Jefferson had not contracted gonorrhea, but rather suffered from the traditional woes of an old man's prostate; Dr. Watkins was eliminating gonorrhea as a possible cause, not diagnosing it.

However, the question of Jefferson's sex life does have to be raised at some point. Here again, we find a man who was afraid in almost equal measure of too much gratification and too little. His letters from France contain many warnings of the sexual traps set by Parisian females for unwary and innocent Americans, yet it was his own time in France that saw Jefferson at his most vulnerable and impassioned. I still remember the slight shock I experienced when I read a letter he wrote in Paris to Maria Cosway, full of rather clumsy phallic jokes borrowed from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. And it must have been in Paris that he first had carnal knowledge of Sally Hemings, who was his late wife's half-sister as well as his own personal property.

Burstein's chapter on this matter—which is, after all, a fairly open “secret”—is admirable. He doesn't waste time, as so many historians have, in making a mystery where none exists. It is obvious without any reference to DNA testing that Jefferson took Sally Hemings as his concubine and fathered several of her children. And, if we look at the books in Jefferson's library, and study the opinions he uttered on related matters, we can readily see how he would have justified the arrangement to himself.

First came the question of bodily integrity. The leading expert on sexual health at the time, the Swiss physician Samuel Tissot, took the view that intercourse of any kind was far less ignoble and life threatening than masturbation. Semen was provided for a purpose and should be neither squandered nor pent up. Knowing—and doubtless appreciating—this, Jefferson had nonetheless to protect the memory of his wife and avoid scandal in general. As he was well aware, the ancient Greek method of doing both these things, and of avoiding venereal disease in the bargain, was to establish a consistent relationship with a compliant member of the household. *Et voilà!* A small element of eugenics may have been involved too, since Jefferson also believed that it was necessary to people the earth and that too many men of position wasted their generative urges on alliances with unfit women. The children he had with Hemings were sturdy and smart, and they made very serviceable slaves on his near-bankrupt estate until he kept his promise to their mother to manumit them at adulthood.

Jefferson applied to himself the same method of analysis he employed for scrutinizing the universe and for anatomizing his beloved Virginia. Surely such symmetry and order implied a design, and therefore a designer? This deistic rationalism was as far as most thinking people could go in an epoch that just preceded the work of Charles Darwin (who was born on the same day as Abraham Lincoln). And Jefferson hit on the same analogy arrived at by the “natural philosopher” William Paley: the timepiece. Even a person who did not know what a clock was for would be able to tell that it was not a vegetable or a stone, that it had a maker.

Interestingly, Jefferson made more use of this example as he got older, referring to himself as “an old watch, with a pinion worn here, and a wheel there, until it can go no longer.” Did he think that a creator's global creation was subject to similar laws? He appears not to have asked himself. But then, this was a man who could oppose the emancipation of slaves because he feared the “ten thousand recollections” they would retain of their hated condition, while almost in the same breath saying dismissively that “their griefs are transient.”

In other words, and despite his notable

modesty and decorum, Jefferson was subject to the same solipsism that encumbered all those who lived before the conclusive analysis of the fossil record and the elements of microbiology. (He could never work out, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, how it was that seashells could be found so high up on the local mountains.) On his Monticello mountaintop he was the center of a universe of his very own, and he was never quite able to dispense with the corollary illusions. This is what makes the account of his death so impressive. He wished to make a good and dignified end, and to be properly remembered for his proudest achievements, yet he seems to have guessed (telling John Adams that he felt neither “hope” nor “fear”) that only extinction awaited him. He certainly did not request the attendance of any minister of religion.

Burstein reproduces a verse of revolting sentimentality, composed by Jefferson on his deathbed, in which he promises his surviving daughter to bear her love to the “Two Seraphs” who have gone before. The lines seem

ambivalent to me, in that Jefferson speaks not so much of crossing a boundary as of coming to an impassable one: “I go to my fathers; I welcome the shore, / which crowns all my hopes, or which buries my cares.” Anyway, a moment’s thought will remind us that a designer who causes the deaths of infant daughters to occur so long before the death of their father has lost hold of the argument from natural order, while a moment’s ordinary sympathy will excuse the dying and exhausted man this last indulgence in the lachrymose. The rest of Burstein’s book has already demonstrated the main and unsurprising point, which is that the author of the Declaration of Independence was in every respect a mammal like ourselves. The only faint cause of surprise is that this can still seem controversial.

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On Faith

SACRED AND SECULAR:
Religion and Politics Worldwide.

By Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart. Cambridge Univ. Press. 329 pp. \$24.99

Reviewed by Os Guinness

Religion is the key to history, Lord Acton wrote. In today’s intellectual circles, however, it’s more like the skunk at the garden party. To many intellectuals, religion is a private matter at best, and most appropriately considered in terms of its functions rather than the significance of its beliefs, let alone its truth claims. At worst, it’s the main source of the world’s conflicts and violence—what Gore Vidal, in his Lowell Lecture at Harvard University in 1992, called “the great unmentionable evil” at the heart of our culture.

Such grim assessments are certainly debatable. It’s a simple fact, for example, that, contrary to the current scapegoating of religion, more people were slaughtered during the 20th century under secularist regimes, led by secularist intellectuals, and in the name of secu-

larist ideologies, than in all the religious persecutions in Western history. But there is little point in bandying about charges and countercharges. If we hope to transcend the seemingly endless culture-warring over religion, we need detailed, objective data about the state of religion in today’s world, and wise, dispassionate discussion of what this evidence means for our common life.

Is religion central or peripheral? Is it disappearing, as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and other proponents of the strong secularization thesis have claimed? Or is religion actually resurgent, as more recent observers such as Peter Berger, David Martin, Rodney Stark, and Philip Jenkins have claimed? Is it a positive force, as some