

Three Blind Mice:
A Case for Christian Intellectualism

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In 21st century American preschools, one would be hard-pressed to locate any traditional nursery rhymes or tunes present in the daily curriculum. Perhaps most are discarded for their lack of sensitivity to cultural subgroups, for their appalling not-so-age-appropriate violence, or for their sheer antiquity. Their presence is certainly not missed among a modern generation who has never heard of Jack's nimble physique or Dame Hubbard's over-indulged dog. But a creative history teacher might occasionally summon the ancient rhymes to unveil covert tales encrypted by the seemingly innocent nonsense poems cast as entertainment for children.

Legend has it that "Three Blind Mice" was penned in the very early 17th century, a season of religious turmoil. Fresh in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Queen Mary I of England had wielded her power to reclaim Catholicism for the State, only to have her efforts capsized by her successors. Historians suggest that the once-popular nursery rhyme was actually penned to document religious persecution during the brief reign of "Bloody Mary."

*"Three blind mice, three blind mice
See how they run, see how they run
They all run after the farmer's wife
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As three blind mice?"*



If historians are right, these vision-deprived rodents actually represent English noblemen who defied the Queen's rule by confessing Protestantism. She trumped their visionary faith by having them burned at the stake, cutting their lives short because they would not pledge blind allegiance to Catholicism.

"Three Blind Mice" was published as a nursery rhyme some 200 years later. Coincidentally, at this precise time, the Enlightenment was at its apex and evangelical Christian faith—though palpable in the revivals of the Great Awakening—was gradually being excised from the realm of reason and intelligent thought. I offer that this compartmentalization of faith and intellect is not only unnecessary but also subtracts from the credibility of the evangelical Christian message. As a convenient and perhaps timely metaphor, I frame this argument with "Three Blind Mice" to share focus and foreboding with the 16th century martyrs.



Three blind mice, three blind mice

Beginning with John Locke, the acclaimed founder of the Enlightenment, faith and intellect were restless bed partners. Though Locke astutely promoted religious toleration and certainly favored the promulgation of Christian virtues and reverence for the Judeo-Christian God, his recommendations for educators called for no intellectual challenge in the development of one's faith. Locke, of course, saw

children as the ephemeral blank slates, upon which their teachers would pour their knowledge about everything from health and nutrition to history and grammar. Ideas about God were to be introduced gradually, as the child's age and development seemed to justify, yet ultimately Locke discouraged thought "about a Being which all must acknowledge incomprehensible" (p. 103). In this manner, Locke essentially promoted blind acceptance of Christian faith without reason.

Influenced greatly by Locke, Thomas Jefferson no doubt composed *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* with the Lockean philosophy of religious toleration as his guide. Scientists like Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton also offered Jefferson a lens through which to view faith and God. In a biography of Jefferson's religious life, Gaustad (1996) noted that Jefferson learned that "God's world was orderly, dependable, regular, and predictable" (p. 21). This logic appealed to Jefferson, who later urged his grandson to "adore God" (Feb. 21, 1825). Though typically private about his religious beliefs, Jefferson's works reveal his reluctance to accept Christian faith beyond what reason can explain. He remained blind, however, to the value of understanding not yet attained by the human mind.

A philosophical triad leading to the divorce between faith and reason is complete with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Friedman (2012) examined Emerson's religious philosophy, tracing Emerson's departure from the pulpit to a realm of spiritual self-reliance. Emerson held that everything faith requires exists within ourselves and our union with the natural world; therefore, reason and faith no longer exist in tension. They rather operate as models of Rousseau noble savages, arriving at peace independent of intelligent analysis or supernatural interference.



See how they run, see how they run

With seminal figures established, let us examine the way Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson ran against the idea of fully integrated faith and intellect. Beginning with Locke, the teacher was urged to “set right” (p. 103) any mistakes his pupil might have about God, a pedagogical practice discouraged in progressive education where the child is encouraged to explore possibilities and discover unique perspectives. In fact, Locke ventured so far as to say that he felt “it would be better if men generally rested in such an idea of *God* without being too curious” (p. 103). The student was to dutifully learn the Christian virtues and the basic stories of the Bible, but inquiry into and testing of one’s faith seemed futile to Locke, who warned that a student could mistakenly underestimate the sovereignty of God in trying to understand his nature from one’s current reality. Locke urged teachers to not allow students to be distracted by “curious inquiries into his inscrutable essence and being,” (p. 103), suggesting that since the nature of God is beyond what we can understand, we should not waste time applying our intellect to the realm of the supernatural.

If passivity defines a Lockean development of faith in a child, then naiveté explains a Jeffersonian perspective of an adult’s willful belief in what does not seem to make sense. “Gullibility,” Jefferson wrote to James Smith, “which they call faith, takes the helm from the hand of reason and the mind becomes a wreck” (Dec. 8, 1822). Jefferson worked out his own faith to be that of what could be explained by

reason. In the few letters he wrote outlining his faith, Jefferson lauded the character of the person Jesus for the moral exemplar he was and for the reformation he brought to Jews gone awry with legalism. As for alleged miracles performed by Jesus, such as water turned into wine or Jesus's own resurrection from death to life, Jefferson called on a man to frame his belief with common logic. The chemical properties of water cannot offer any support for water's occasional metamorphosis into wine; therefore, Jefferson argued, these stories must be dismissed as fables. He was so certain of this, in fact, that he rewrote the New Testament. Removing, among many things, the miracles of Jesus, Jefferson's Bible (1803) instead includes only the life and teachings of Jesus that showcase moral virtues to be practiced in daily citizenship. Whereas Locke encouraged intellectual resignation to the mysteries of God, Jefferson promoted realignment of faith in submission to reason. Locke subjected reason to the superiority of faith; Jefferson subjected faith to the superiority of reason.

Enter Emerson. Extending Unitarianism into a transcendental view of self as the embodiment of God, therefore obliterating the need for faith and reason to rub shoulders, Emerson argued that the pulpit was obsolete because all God embodied man and was the muse behind all spiritual thoughts or experiences. In his address to Harvard Divinity School seniors, Emerson used the exalted figure of the Christian faith—Jesus Christ—to demoralize traditional Christianity. Jesus, he argued, was proof that God dwelt within man. Furthermore, man has a "limited way of using the mind of Christ" (Emerson), in that the collective soul of man, as host to God, is a primary source for truth and wisdom. Why, then, would we need a preacher?

Within ourselves, God is embodied. Within our souls, truth exists. The answers lie within us as the lovechild of God and Soul. Faith? Not necessary. Reasoning out one's faith? Look in a mirror. The answers are within and surface on demand.



They all ran after the farmer's wife

Mice are not bold creatures who mercilessly attack humans at night. In fact, as we know, they are timid; if they appear to be chasing anything—such as the proverbial farmer's wife—they are likely startled and disoriented, in a feverish pace to find a safe place to hide. Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson each reacted to the evangelical Christian faith in what reads, at best, as disinterest or, at worst, cowardice. In their posture towards the intellectually complicated topic of faith, they chased after it, blindly searching for a comfortable seat of understanding instead of employing their legendary intellects to unpack biblical curiosities.

In "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," Locke acknowledged "the necessity of believing without knowledge, nay often upon very slight ground, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in" (1689). Certainly, Locke was not promoting all-around willful ignorance; in context, he was arguing that we should be careful not to castigate others for errors in their perspectives when we could be spending that energy to access further knowledge of our own. Unfortunately, Locke did not appear to connect that inquiry challenge to the Christian faith. As aforementioned, initial learning about the Bible was to be a passive experience for a

young student (Locke, 1693). The child is never encouraged to wrestle with the hard-to-comprehend mysteries of the Christian faith. In fact, as we have seen, Locke discouraged this. In doing so, Locke removed faith from the realm of intellect and placed it in the convenient canister of personal disposition and actions towards others. If one identifies himself as a follower of Jesus Christ, Locke argued, he must first “make war upon his own lusts and vices” (1689). In other words, clean up your act because “it is in vain for any man to usurp the name of Christian, without holiness of life, purity of manners, benignity and meekness of spirit” (1689). No present-day evangelical Christian would argue with the moral virtue that Jesus commanded his followers to sustain; however, Locke’s eviction of the Christian life from intelligent inquiry seems to fall short of scriptural invitation to “come now, and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). For Locke, the pursuit of Christian faith involved moral purging and then resting comfortably on the knowledge of the Bible poured in by one’s former teachers. God is incomprehensible, so we should not attempt to understand him.

Thomas Jefferson, an omnivorous reader, sat uncomfortably with the idea of blind acceptance of Christian teachings. In one of his letters to nephew Peter Carr, Jefferson advised Carr to not be afraid to reason out his faith, even if his conclusions were disturbing. Jefferson examined Christian teachings himself and chased irrational faith away. Rejecting Calvinist tenets due to “the impossibility of defending them,” Jefferson also condescended upon evangelical Christians who were fanatical or who expressed love for Jesus with the same fervor as they adored “a mere earthly lover.” With Calvinism dismissed as “demoralizing,” Jefferson’s

irritation with evangelical Christians led him to an analysis of Jesus that stops short of the inconceivable (Aug. 10, 1787). Arguing in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “Reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error,” Jefferson proceeded to accept the virtuous teachings of Jesus but dismissed his miracles entirely. Faith as defined by the writer of Hebrews, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1)¹, was no longer necessary because Jefferson shackled Christian teachings with the chains of his own intellect. As if to close the case, he rewrote the Bible in such a way as to pose no challenges to the mind beyond what can be easily conceived as the actions of everyday life. In this reduction, Jefferson ironically appeared to lose conviction about absolute truth, for his later idea was to bring all religions together “and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality” (Nov. 2, 1822). In his run against faith, Jefferson resigned to the decision that faith simply is not required.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson reasoned his way out of Unitarianism into a transcendentalist philosophy, the faith made obsolete by Jefferson was not even a benign option for Emerson. Unitarian preacher W. E. Channing had hailed intellectual reasoning as a supreme God-given gift, even encouraging its application in the context of Christian faith (Friedman, 2012), but Emerson aligned more with the transcendental caveat that “religious truths must make sense, must jibe with our own sense of right and wrong” (p. 33). Within the soul, Emerson believed, existed all that man needed to be virtuous and holy. The soul, as the embodiment of God,

¹ All Scripture references are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. They are referenced parenthetically by the specific biblical book, chapter, and verse from which the references are drawn.

monitors itself with its own checks and balances. “In the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire,” Emerson argued. “If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice” (July 15, 1838). Emerson’s sweet spot of spiritual conviction, then, rested in the self-regulating automaton within the human soul.



Who cut off their tails with a butcher's knife

Sometimes that which we chase away circles around and then behind us, creeping back up into our realities with a crippling blow. I contend that the efforts of Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson backfired, casting a blinding spotlight on the weaknesses in their own constitutions. For Locke, blindly accepting faith was easier than confronting its complexities. For Jefferson, the complexities were dismissed because they simply defied the logic of his own mind. Emerson resolved the tension with a collective soul that was front-loaded with all the spiritual understanding a person would need. None of them, however, invited a true marriage between the Christian faith and their intellect, a constant posture of inquiry into truths and mysteries of the Bible. Their influence towards moral virtue and, as a result, authentic faith, was limited by the very arbiter of their religious philosophy—the sacred text of Christianity, the Bible.

At the risk of belaboring the metaphor, the Bible works as the lancet that cuts off the credibility of Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson to speak to authentic Christian faith. Returning to the writer of Hebrews, the text of the Bible itself is compared to a frighteningly sharp “two-edged sword” (4:12). Indeed, its very text extends frequent invitations to use one’s intellect to challenge the truths within. The prophet Malachi conveyed to the disenfranchised Hebrews God’s challenge to test him and see if he would do what he said he would do (Malachi 3:10). The apostle Paul urged the young Timothy, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). To the church in Philippi, the same apostle commanded that they “work out” the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:12). Saint Peter promoted studious faith when he told Christians to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Jesus himself indicated that the *greatest* commandment of all was to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy *mind*” (Matthew 22:37, emphasis added). Centuries later, Pope John Paul II (Sept. 21, 1998) illustrated perhaps this very idea when he explained:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.

Contemplation and the resulting exegesis, then, may fulfill part of the Great Commandment; therefore, the intellectual pursuit of faith is an essential part of the Christian life.

Princeton's McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence Robert P. George (2008) mitigated the tension between a devotion to Jesus Christ and an active intellectual life. "Faith," he offered, "far from being the enemy of reason, is its indispensable ally" (p. xvi). Columbia professor David Damrosch (1995) worried about the tendency to compartmentalize the disciplines, resulting in a lack of interconnectivity in knowledge. Dockery (2008) extended this concern by arguing that there exists a "false dichotomy between the life of the mind and the life of faith" (p. 11). In short, a common misconception—one that Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson each promoted—is that Christian faith, specifically evangelical Christian faith, is anti-intellectual. Of the three, Jefferson's position is perhaps echoed most today among those who mock a stalwart evangelical Christian faith as ignorance to science and reason. Because some items in Christianity's sacred text seem difficult, or even impossible, to explain with scientific reasoning, a scholar who persists in believing them typically is not esteemed in the academy. There is rare objection that a man named Jesus existed on earth and that he was a world-class humanitarian; like Jefferson, many great minds draw the line there, dismissing the rest of the accounts of the Bible as the exaggerated fantasies of Jesus's enthusiastic followers, distorted over time and now elevated to mythical status. Indeed, Jefferson wrote that much damage done to the reputation of Jesus is done by people who claim to be his followers (March 21, 1801). This is likely still true today because many evangelical Christians are just as

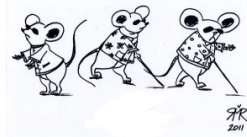
guilty of divorcing faith and intellect as secular scholars are. They often turn a blind eye to science and feel threatened by enlightened interpretations of biblical mysteries.

Ancient Greeks, however, seemed aware that there could be truths outside their immediate grasp of understanding. Centuries before Darwin, great minds of Athens anticipated that perhaps there was a degree of knowing more sophisticated than man currently possessed on his own. Documented by Saint Luke, a physician and disciple of Jesus, the Athenians had erected an altar dedicated “to the unknown god” (Acts 17:23) at Areopagus, the very location where they met regularly to discuss and hear new ideas. The apostle Paul here argued with the Stoics and Epicureans that the Judeo-Christian God was the supreme truth that they already acknowledged existed but could not yet define.² Some converted; some did not. Notwithstanding, the emphasis remains that Christian faith can and should be an intellectual pursuit, not a weak-kneed suspension of logic in favor of what otherwise sounds like a fairy tale. Many biblical accounts defy man’s current reasoning powers, but a Darwinian argument might logically project a stage of man that can understand these mysteries. A text-only argument traces the relationship between man and an omniscient likeness with God (Genesis 1-3). Either argument preferred offers a satisfactory explanation as to why present-day man cannot comprehend all

² Incidentally, Paul had just arrived in Athens after having fled persecution in Berea. Luke’s commentary on the Bereans is that they were “more noble” than a famously devoted group of Christians in Thessalonica because the Bereans actually listened to Paul’s message with an open mind and then “searched the scriptures daily” to see if what he was preaching was actually true (Acts 17:11). Horace Mann (1848) referred to these studious Bereans in his *Twelfth Annual Report*.

spiritual things. Obfuscation in any other discipline is the impetus for further study; the Christian faith should be no exception.

Jefferson himself suggested the university as an appropriate place to pursue knowledge and understanding, casting what appears to be an open disposition towards truth: “For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead” (Dec. 27, 1820). Jefferson was likely familiar with Rousseau’s *Emile*, in which Rousseau offered that “the greatest idea of the divinity comes to us from reason alone” (1762). Rousseau further explained that without reasoning out our faith, we might as well fill heaven “with magpies and parroquets.” Horace Mann (1848) would later call it “the worst of all crimes against religious truth” to shut out logic and reasoning. By precluding partnership between faith and intellect, then, Lockean, Jeffersonian, and Emersonian religious philosophies are truncated by the very faith they seek to accommodate.



Did you ever see such a sight in your life as three blind mice?

Nothing would be more ridiculous than a history teacher using his own version of the Declaration of Independence as a primary authoritative text. An English teacher offering her own, more likable, version of *Robinson Crusoe*, would likely be terminated if she offered her rendition as more authentic than Defoe’s. Without fidelity to the original text of historical Christianity, what, then, can be valued in religious philosophy that dismisses intellect (Locke)? That dismisses faith (Jefferson)? Or that congeals the two as a preexisting condition of the human race

(Emerson)? Three great minds in intellectual history offered a plan for reconciling man with the Divine, yet their ideas were cut short by their infidelity to the Bible. Blinded by the finite nature of their own cognition, Locke, Jefferson, and Emerson failed to render an appropriate venue to host the glorious tension between faith and reason. “The best laid schemes o’ Mice and Men / Gang aft agley [go oft awry]” (Burns, 1785), and we are no wiser in truths because of their botched attempts at authentic Christian faith.

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