Publishing Jefferson’s “Syllabus”

During the American Revolution, Van der Kemp admired Thomas Jefferson as a political leader and writer. As secretary of state under Washington the political philosopher was respected. When Van der Kemp read the Notes on Virginia and fragments of other scientific writings, he wanted to probe further into the great man’s ideas. For a scholar, respect for Jefferson was in no way inconsistent with opposition to his political leadership during the Napoleonic threat.

Jefferson’s “Syllabus” was a small essay on religion which he had sent to Benjamin Rush with an explanatory letter on April 21, 1803. The essay recalled “delightful conversations” in the evenings of 1798 and 1799, with the Christian religion as one of the subjects. In spite of reports to the contrary, Jefferson claimed to be a follower of Christ, “sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others” and ascribing to Jesus “every human excellence.” He had just read Joseph Priestley’s little essay on “Socrates and Jesus Compared” and had decided to draw his own ideas together in writing an estimate of Christianity. The essay was written midway through his first term as president, and he wished the document to remain private; he feared publicity would bring attacks which would weaken freedom of religion. He felt a man should never betray “the common right of inde-
pendent opinion, by answering questions of faith, which the laws have left between god and himself.”

Although Van der Kemp did not know of the “Syllabus” until later, he had had contacts with Jefferson, and knew many of his writings. Through a mutual friend Jefferson had given him letters of introduction to America in 1788. When Van der Kemp applied for official intercession for his funds in the Netherlands, Jefferson as secretary of state answered the request. Van der Kemp knew and appreciated Jefferson’s part in the Revolution, knew the Declaration of Independence and the act for establishing religious freedom in Virginia. In the *Notes on Virginia*, he had read not only the parts on natural history but also the part on religious freedom and freedom of conscience, where Jefferson wrote, “The rights of conscience we never submitted [to government], we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God.” Van der Kemp believed this too. Likewise he accepted as his own feeling another statement: “Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation.”

Jefferson read Van der Kemp’s *Researches on Buffon’s and Jefferson’s Theories in Natural History* and his *Sketch of a Desired Work*. The great man appreciated Van der Kemp’s education and recognized that he was unafraid of ideas.

Van der Kemp first saw the “Syllabus” when he visited John Adams at Quincy in 1813. Jefferson had loaned it to Adams, who showed it to Van der Kemp during one of their religious discussions. Shortly after returning to Oldenbarneveld, Francis asked Adams for the “Syllabus.”

Shall I not receive the Syllabus of the Philosopher of Monticello? or, must you ask his leave? I think I was entitled to it, having in my *Philos. Researches*—which I now think, stand no chance for Publication, but are intended for Cambridge’s College[—]have been so profuse in his
deserved praises—defending his one and twenty gods against the cants of scholars, as [likewise] I lashed his pantheistical boat in one of his mem.[oirs] in the Philo. Trans.2

But Adams returned the "Syllabus" to Jefferson. Adams, himself, was afraid to publish anything on religion, afraid of the calumny "worse than Death: worse than the stoning of Stephen." He said he would be held up in the pulpit and the press and circulated in private letters and in whispers as "a Deist an Atheist, and the Devil knows what." He said that Jefferson would be unwise to let a copy of the sketch be taken. "Repose is all that he or I can desire. Neither Monticello nor Mount Wollaston [Adams' home] are ambitious of being quoted as Authorities in the Science of Theology."  

Before Van der Kemp received this letter, he asked again for the "Syllabus." Adams replied immediately that he was honor bound to return it without making a copy. Van der Kemp regretfully accepted this course of action; he was quite intrigued with the sketch, adding that "the contents of that paper imbued me with some less unfavorable opinions about the moral principles of that man."  

For two years Van der Kemp thought from time to time about the "Syllabus" and at last on March 24, 1816, wrote to Jefferson for it. Jefferson replied that it was only an outline sent to Rush and later to Adams. Both had been asked not to publicize it. The author was unwilling to draw on himself "a swarm of insects, whose buzz is more disquieting than their bite." However, he told Van der Kemp there would be no objection to anonymous publication. It might even "do good by producing discussion and finally a true view of the merits of this great reformer." He had also extracted from the Bible the text of the morals of Jesus, "as distinguishable from the matter in which they are imbedded as diamonds in dunghills." He thought that the "Extract" with improvements and the "Syllabus" combined with a life of Jesus to be written by Van der Kemp would at last show
the world "the immortal merit of this first of human Sages." If the material were published in England there seemed little likelihood that Jefferson would be suspected of authorship.5

Van der Kemp read the sketches with enthusiasm and prepared the "Syllabus" and the letter to Rush for publication, being careful to copy them by his own hand. Then he sent the work to the *Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature* in England. When he informed Jefferson of the disposition, the latter replied that he was "entirely satisfied." He hoped for a full and fair discussion of his major grounds but doubted if it would come to pass. He did not want to become involved in the discussion however.6

After concluding the correspondence and after trusting Van der Kemp with the "Syllabus," Jefferson asked Adams about him. "There is a Mr. Vanderkemp, of New York, a correspondent, I believe, of yours, with whom I have exchanged some letters, without knowing who he is. Will you tell me?" 7 Adams replied with a laudatory sketch:

The biography of Mr. Vanderkemp would require a volume, which I could not write if a million were offered me as a reward for this work. After a learned and scientific education, he entered the army in Holland, and served as a captain with reputation; but loving books more than arms, he resigned his commission, and became a preacher. My acquaintance with him began at Leyden, in 1780. He was the minister of the Mennonite congregation, the richest in Europe, in that city, where he was celebrated as the most elegant writer in the Dutch language. He was the intimate friend of Luzac and DeGyselaer. In 1788, when the king of Prussia threatened Holland with invasion, his party insisted on his taking a command of the most exposed and most important post in the seven provinces. He was soon surrounded by the Prussian forces; but he defended his fortress with a prudence, fortitude, patience, and perseverance, which were
admired by all Europe, till, abandoned by his nation, desti-
tute of provisions and ammunition, still refusing to sur-
render, he was offered the most honorable capitulation.
He accepted it, was offered very advantageous proposals,
but despairing of the liberty of his country, he returned
to Antwerp; determined to emigrate to New York, he
wrote to me in London, requesting letters of introd-
uction. I sent him letters to Governor Clinton and several
others of our little great men. His history in this country
is equally curious and affecting. He left property in Hol-
land, which the revolutions there have annihilated, and
I fear is now pinched with poverty. His head is deeply
learned, and his heart is pure. I scarcely know a more
amiable character. A gentleman here asked my opinion
of him. My answer was, "he is a mountain of salt to the
earth." He has written to me occasionally, and I have
answered his letters in great haste. You may well suppose
that such a man has not always been able to understand
our American politics. Nor have I. Had he been as great
a master of our language as he was of his own, he would
at this day have been one of the most conspicuous char-
acters in the United States.8

John exaggerated the facts of his friend's early life a little
but did not exaggerate his feeling for Van der Kemp.

Although Van der Kemp specified that the publication
should conceal the source of the "Syllabus" when he sent
it to England, the editor of The Monthly Repository was
not cooperative. The writing was ascribed to "an Eminent
American Statesman" who would "probably be recognized
by such of our readers as are acquainted with the charac-
ters of the leading men in the American revolution." The
editorial introduction, Van der Kemp's covering letter, Jeff-
ferson's letter to Rush and the "Syllabus" all appeared in
the October issue of 1816. When John Quincy Adams saw
the material in the English publication, he had no doubt it
was the work of Jefferson and Van der Kemp. He sent a
copy home on November 19 and repeated the names of the
authors on November 26. In February, in all innocence, Adams sent the copy to Van der Kemp with permission to send it on to Jefferson. Abigail explained its origin. Van der Kemp hurriedly explained Jefferson's desire for anonymity, and Abigail wrote to John Quincy not to disclose the authors. Van der Kemp had cleverly dated his editorial letter O—d which could have been Oxford and did not say a statesman had written the "Syllabus" but even insisted that no guesses or hints should be made. Before the manuscript arrived in England the friend to whom it was addressed died and the editor of the Monthly Repository reported the author as a statesman and spelled out Oldenbarneveld.

Jefferson became alarmed by a similar report that his authorship was known. He wrote to Van der Kemp that he had learned "with real concern" that the editor had the name of the author of the "Syllabus" and was coyly withholding it. He feared that with coaxing, the editor would disclose Jefferson's name and let loose upon him "the genus irritabile vatum [the irritable genus of soothsayers]" on both continents. Jefferson declared:

be it so. I shall receive with folded arms all their hacking & hewing. I shall not ask their passport to a country [area of learning] which they claim indeed as theirs, but which was made, I trust, for moral man, and not for dog-matising venal jugglers. Should they however, instead of abuse, appeal to the tribunal of reason and fact, I shall really be glad to see on what point they will begin their attack. for it expressly excludes all question of supernatural character or endowment. I am in hopes it may find advocates as well as opposers, and produce for us a temperate & full development. as to myself, I shall be a silent auditor.

Van der Kemp's explanation to Jefferson was satisfactory, as he thought all editors pretended to greater knowledge than they had. He was not afraid of strife but had reached an "age of quietism" when he did not wish "to be kicked
by the asses of hierophantism.” The rumors of Jefferson's authorship caused no great attacks upon his character, quieting his fears. He and Van der Kemp enjoyed a pleasurable correspondence thereafter.

Van der Kemp made some efforts to follow through on Jefferson's suggestion that he write a life of Christ. His sketch was sent to Adams but his friend discouraged the project. He replied, "What! Why! Wherefore! Is not the Life of Jesus in the Four Evangelists? Where else can you find it?" He had seen half a dozen modern lives of Jesus which Jefferson might not have seen but to no loss on his part. They were of no value to Adams and he expected nothing from Van der Kemp's biography. Van der Kemp had suggested that Andrews Norton or Edward Everett might be persuaded to do the job. Adams insisted it had already been done.

Jefferson was discouraging, but for a different reason. He called the sketch "a magnificent skeleton . . . of what would indeed be a compleat Encyclopedia of Christian Philosophy." He felt the magnitude was such that it would require a Newton in physics, a Locke in metaphysics and a historian with great judgment, candor and many years ahead of him. He hoped that Van der Kemp would do a part of it himself, the mortal biography of Jesus. "[T]his candidly and rationally written, without any regard to sectarian dogmas, would reconcile to his character a weighty multitude who do not properly estimate it, and would lay the foundation of a genuine christianity." Jefferson suggested some German works which might be useful and commented briefly on Italian sources which Van der Kemp had mentioned.

Adams had suggested that Van der Kemp read and answer Charles François DuPuis—but that it would take him twenty volumes. Van der Kemp replied that the Christian system could be explained in a few lines and no human power could crush it. "The Gospel Doctrine is from above—the purest—the most perfect morality—proved by an irresistible evidence the resurrection of Jesus—with the full-
est display of the mercy of our Beautiful Father." His tremendous sketch "aimed to examine and destroy the sandy foundations on which the bigotry of orthodox believers" as well as infidels built their various systems. These sentiments were similar to a short statement by Jefferson:

The doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend all to the happiness of man.
1. That there is one only God, and he all perfect.
2. That there is a future state of rewards and punishments.
3. That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.

The full title of the essay as published in The Monthly Repository was, "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Doctrines of Jesus Compared with those of Others." Van der Kemp wrote that the "most virulent and artful attacks" of infidels had done less injury to the religion of Jesus than had some reputed friends with "bigotry and false zeal." The "Syllabus" had the "stamp of candour" in the design to place Christianity in a clear view. The author of the "Syllabus" proposed to treat the ethics of the ancient philosophers, the Jews and Jesus as they were formulated. When Jesus appeared "his parentage was obscure; his condition poor; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct & innocent; he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, and of the sublimest eloquence." He was executed before he had a chance to develop a full system of moral duties. Therefore, the fragments are defective and have been further disfigured by schismatizing followers who engrafted on them "the mysticisms of a Graecian Sophist, frittering them into subtleties, & obscuring them with jargon." However, with care one can construct the system of Jesus. He emphasized one God with just attributes. He taught universal philanthropy. He demanded purity of thought as well as action. He taught emphatically the doctrine of the future life.

Both Van der Kemp and Jefferson hoped that the sketch
would be stimulating to readers and would arouse discussion and further writing. No evidence appears in *The Monthly Repository* that readers were either antagonized or excited. However, further contributions to the magazine by Van der Kemp may have been encouraged because of this outspoken sketch.

In the November issue a letter from John Sherman and the Reverend Isaac Bliss Peirce asked aid for the church at Trenton. This letter was followed by a copy of the articles of association sent by Van der Kemp. In the same issue was a reprint of Van der Kemp's article on Crellius, first printed in America in 1813, and a translation of a journey of Crellius done by Van der Kemp.

In August, 1817, *The Monthly Repository* published a five-page article by Van der Kemp entitled, "Some Account of Dr. Balthasar Bekker and of the Mennonite Baptists." Bekker had written a book, *The Enchanted World*, trying to expose the common belief in devils. Van der Kemp surveyed the book, gave numerous collateral writings, and indicated the repercussions ending in Bekker's removal from his pulpit. The last part of the article described the Mennonite Baptists, particularly Dutch, and pointed out their liberal-conservative division. He hoped that his comments would inspire the leaders of the liberals to write the complete history of Unitarianism in Holland.

At about this same time Van der Kemp became enthusiastic about another liberal religious effort. He acquired a copy of the book, *AΠΕΞΕΩΝ ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ* or, *A New Way of Deciding Old Controversies*, written under the pen name Basanistes. The "New Way" was an attempt to explode the doctrines of the Trinity by showing that the arguments in support of the divinity of three, by the same arguments, could be made ridiculous by the inclusion of Moses. Van der Kemp thought an American edition would do good, especially among the higher class who might therefore be lured by it to become patrons of liberal sentiments and supporters of liberal writers. In America, with no state church, such patronage would overawe "an intolerant
Clergy” and the mob would then be swayed to support freedom of religious thought. Van der Kemp loaned his copy to Adams, who also enjoyed the clever presentation.

In the fall of 1817 a Dutch lady, Miss Halshoff, visited America in behalf of world peace. She had written a pamphlet called Peace Republican’s Manual. She had been imprisoned twice for her activities. Van der Kemp was impressed by the pamphlet and sent copies to both Adams and Jefferson. The latter was also impressed, saying the Manual was full of the “soundest principles of human independence” and that he commiserated with “her sufferings in so holy a cause.”

At about the same time Van der Kemp sent his little essay on “Incestuous Marriages” to both his friends. Adams laughed at it but Jefferson took it seriously. He thought Van der Kemp had proved without question that a man might make a second marriage with his first wife’s sister under both natural and Mosaic law. Adams said it was legal but inexpedient. Jefferson wrote that during the Revolution he was on a committee to revise the laws of Virginia. They had copied the very words of Levitical law which allowed marriage with a sister-in-law. After some years the Virginians decided that such marriages often produced heartburnings, jealousies and even crimes. But, as Jefferson explained, that part of the law was later repealed.

Jefferson was asked to publish more of his writings but insisted he had nothing worth publishing. When Van der Kemp brought up the subject of the cycles of nature and the question of species becoming extinct, Jefferson replied at great length to some of Van der Kemp’s arguments in his earlier Researches. He commented particularly on the heavenly bodies and Van der Kemp must have been delighted. The movements of these bodies had been considered erratic and potentially destructive of the earth under certain movements. But Pierre Simon de Laplace, French astronomer, demonstrated that these supposed irregularities were strictly in obedience to the laws of motion and
should continue forever. This eternity did not seem to be contrary to the Christian religion inasmuch as the God who created the bodies and laws might stop them. Jefferson opposed the theory of an evolutionary development of both land and life and reiterated his doubts as to the possible extinction of any species.22

Jefferson's health was not sufficiently good for him to carry on extensive correspondence. A stiffening wrist handicapped him in 1820 but he wrote about his condition, about the worthlessness of his papers, and a blast about the concealing of true Christianity by religious leaders. He hoped that education would dissipate the “clouds of darkness” but thought he would not live to see it.23 In 1823 he had to dictate a short letter to Van der Kemp merely thanking him for his letters and apologizing for being unable to answer properly.24 He was better in 1824 and wrote in some detail of a book by Pierre Jean Marie Flourens who had experimented with removing the cerebrum from animals, particularly chickens. This resulted in the loss of purpose, direction and memory. The conclusion was that the seat of thought was the cerebrum. Jefferson raised the question as to whether a human being would still have a soul if his cerebrum were removed. And if the soul left the body with the cerebrum, did it go directly to heaven? He seemed to hope these questions would confound the strict creed holders.25 Van der Kemp was stimulated by such considerations but at the age of seventy-two was unwilling to seek a strong controversy.

The last letter from Jefferson was on November 30, 1825. He was more and more disabled but wanted to thank Van der Kemp for having Peter Vreede’s book on commerce sent to him. He was unable to write a review of it. His health was poor and, at his age, he much preferred to read and study the classics. He said he was spending most of his time organizing the University of Virginia. He was proud of the faculty, obtained mostly in England, and the first year was drawing to a successful close. More applicants were expected for the second year than they could accommodate.
but they planned to enlarge the facilities as fast as possible. Jefferson considered the institution to be “on the most liberal plan” and very inexpensive.\textsuperscript{26}

Van der Kemp won Jefferson’s friendship through their mutual interests in natural science and liberal religion. Van der Kemp was the more aggressive of the two in the correspondence but Jefferson wrote with great interest. The influence on one another at their advanced ages probably was a matter of encouragement in their set interests. The publication of the “Syllabus” was the high spot.