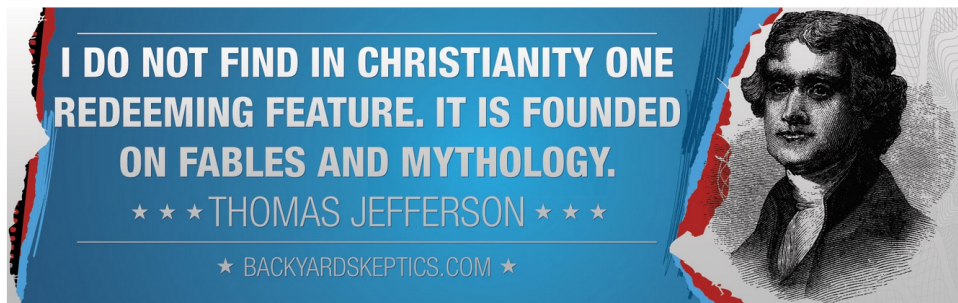


Atheism and skepticism are not coterminous

By [James F. McGrath](#)

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What is the message of this billboard?



As [Hemant Mehta](#) as well as [various news outlets are pointing out](#), the message is that atheists, however much they may think of themselves as ultra-skeptical and critical thinkers, aren't always. [Having "skeptics" or "freethinkers" in the name of your organization](#) or in your self-description doesn't mean it fits all of the time, if at all.

You see, the quote is not an authentic quote from Thomas Jefferson.

[Anyone](#)

[who is familiar with the Jefferson Bible would probably have realized the need to investigate the quote's authenticity. Jefferson didn't discard the entire Bible. He took scissors to the Gospels, cutting out miracles and the like but leaving those things that he thought had "redeeming features."](#)

And so it is perhaps not surprising that [a widely found version of the quotation online reads](#) "I do not find in *orthodox* Christianity one redeeming feature." That would be a more plausible quotation to come from Jefferson. But even so, there is no evidence that he ever said it in that form either.

In addition to this recent episode involving a billboard with a spurious quotation making the point, Jefferson himself provides evidence that skepticism is not coterminous with atheism. Jefferson apparently did not altogether refrain from using the epithet “Christian” in reference to himself, and while [Deist](#) also seems apt to many, [Jefferson would perhaps have preferred](#) the term [“Unitarian.”](#)

Whether you are religious or atheist, Deist, Unitarian, or traditional theist, it is a mistake to assume that you are above the need for caution, skepticism and critical thinking.

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