

Chapter 1 : Mark Silk | LibraryThing

*Preface Geographical diversity is the hallmark of religion in the United States. There are Catholic zones and evangelical Bible Belts, a Lutheran domain and a Mormon fastness, metropolitan concentrations of Jews and Muslims, and (in a different dimension) parts of the country where religious affiliation of whatever kind is very high and parts.*

It had not been a good year. His efforts to force his hated rival Alexander Hamilton out of the cabinet for financial misconduct failed miserably. At 50 years old, he was eager to return to his beloved Virginia estate to live as a gentleman farmer and philosopher. Adams, the vice president, refused to believe that his estranged friend was really done with public life. In letters to his two eldest sons, he sourly assessed the man he was convinced would challenge him to succeed Washington as president. On January 2 he wrote to Charles: It is wonderfully adroit in concealing itself from its owner, I had almost said from itself. Jefferson thinks he shall by this step get a Reputation of an humble, modest, meek Man, wholly without ambition or Vanity. He may even have deceived himself into this Belief. But if a Prospect opens, The World will see and he will feel, that he is as ambitious as Oliver Cromwell though no soldier. At other Moments he may meditate the gratification of his Ambition; Numa was called from the Forrests to be King of Rome. But who was Egeria, and how confident can we be that Adams intended Hemings when he invoked her name? Egeria is a figure of some importance in the mythical early history of ancient Rome. According to Livy and Plutarch, after the death of the warlike Romulus, the senators invited a pious and intellectual Sabine named Numa Pompilius to become their king. Accepting the job with some reluctance, Numa set about establishing laws and a state religion. To persuade his unruly subjects that he had supernatural warrant for his innovations, Numa claimed that he was under the tutelage of Egeria, a divine nymph or goddess whom he would meet in a sacred grove. The stories say she was not just his instructor but also his spouse, his Sabine wife having died some years before. Library of Congress Adams, who was well versed in Latin and Greek literature, had every reason to feel pleased with his comparison. Like Numa, Jefferson was a widower his wife, Martha, died in who would prepare himself for the job by consorting with a nymph, his second wife, in a grove that was sacred to him. An American Controversy , what she made of the Adams references. Soon translated into English, Spanish and German, the novel became a runaway best seller in the North Atlantic world. It was while researching a novel of my own about the life and afterlife of Numa and Egeria that I happened upon the allusions in the two Adams letters. As a student of religion in public life, I have long been interested in Numa as an exemplary figure in the history of Western political thought from Cicero and St. Augustine to Machiavelli and Rousseau. But did he intend the goddess in question to refer to Sally Hemings? Seven years earlier, Jefferson had arranged for his 8-year-old daughter, Mary, to join him and his elder daughter, Martha, in Paris. Hemings was then 14 years old but, tellingly, Abigail Adams thought she was 15 or Writing Jefferson that the two had arrived, Abigail Adams took them under her wing until an emissary showed up two weeks later to convey them to Paris, where Jefferson almost certainly began having sex with Hemings. So in John Adams had seen for himself that Jefferson had a nubile beauty in his possession. By the end of , John Quincy and Charles presumably would have been aware of it, too. Otherwise, the sexual allusion to Egeria would have been lost on them. Significantly, John Adams did not allude to the matter when he wrote to Abigail at around the same time. She and Jefferson had something of a mutual admiration society, after all. So while John Adams, in Philadelphia, did not refrain from criticizing Jefferson in his January 6, , letter to Abigail, in Massachusetts, he did so with care. Jefferson went off Yesterday, and a good riddance of bad ware. I hope his Temper will be more cool and his Principles more reasonable in Retirement than they have been in office. I am almost tempted to wish he may be chosen Vice President at the next Election for there if he could do no good, he could do no harm. He has Talents I know, and Integrity I believe: There was no mention of Numa and Egeria. As I see it, John knew that his wife would not be amused by the insinuation that Jefferson was retiring to an intimate relationship with the maidservant she had cared for in London seven years earlier. That joke was reserved for the boys. Among the African-Americans enslaved at Monticello were up to 70 members of the Hemings family over 5 generations. In , Jefferson was narrowly defeated for the presidency by Adams and, under Article II of the

Constitution changed in , indeed became vice president, having received the second-largest number of electoral votes. Four years later, he returned the favor, besting Adams in perhaps the ugliest presidential election in American history. Jefferson was sufficiently impressed to provide the journalist with financial support to keep up his anti-Federalist work. After his release, he approached Jefferson and asked to be appointed postmaster of Richmond. Callender and Sally will be remembered as long as Jefferson as Blotts in his Character. The story of the latter, is a natural and almost unavoidable Consequence of that foul contagion pox in the human Character Negro Slavery. But is it Sound Policy will it promote Morality, to keep up the Cry of such disgracefull Stories, now the Man is voluntarily retired from the World. The more the Subject is canvassed will not the horror of the Infamy be diminished? He does not reject the idea that Jefferson behaved like other Virginia planters. It may be time to moderate the received view that journalism in the early republic was no-holds-barred. In reality, reporters did not rush into print with scandalous accusations of sexual misconduct by public figures. It took a James Callender to get the ball rolling. In Abigail, Adams had his ownâ€”though so far as I know she was never referred to as such. The question is, from the evidence we have, unanswerable. When Jefferson died in , he and Hemings, like Numa and Egeria, had to all intents and purposes been married for four decades. Not long afterward, his daughter Martha freed Hemings from slavery, as her children had been freed before her. We do not know if, as she celebrated her liberation, she also mourned her loss. A former reporter and editorial writer at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, he is the author of several books on religion in contemporary America and is a senior columnist for the Religion News Service.

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*Mark Silk, director of the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, Hartford, is the author of "Unsecular Media" and the editor of the magazine Religion in the News.*

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