

# THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF EDUCATION

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## Introduction

The multi-talented Thomas Jefferson needs no introduction to American educators. This naturalist, farmer, inventor, architect, politician, and intellectual was a leading framer of early American educational as well as political institutions and ideals. Perhaps less well understood, however, is that the purpose of education for Jefferson reflected his deepest religious convictions. One may almost say that for Jefferson education in and for a republic was religious activity.

In a letter written to his nephew, Jefferson encouraged the young man to read the Bible with a critical eye as he sought rational certainty and moral encouragement.

Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also god, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love.<sup>1</sup>

This letter captures many dimensions of Jefferson's view of life and the importance of education for life. Jefferson was as concerned with moral as well as intellectual maturation, and with respect to both dimensions of life education was the key. A young person needed to learn how to search for the truth and to become morally independent in the process. Belief (or non-belief) in God was almost entirely reduced to a function of this kind of moral education.

Religion for Jefferson, as apparent in the quotation above (and as evident in Jefferson's edited version of the Bible), is important not so much for a person's relation to God, but rather for the assistance it provides in one's moral maturation, "incitements to virtue." Similarly, Jefferson wrote to John Adams late in their lives that his own religion was "known to my God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one."<sup>2</sup>

Jefferson's view of life was basically religious. He did not seek to develop moral and intellectual purpose apart from religion, nor did he try to convince his nephew (or anyone else) that God should be forgotten or rejected. He did not denounce

1. Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. See Appendix V in James B. Conant, *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 102.
2. Jefferson's letter to John Adams, January 11, 1817, in H. A. Washington, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, VII (Washington, DC: Taylor and Maury, 1854), 56.

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Christianity as an atheist or agnostic. Rather, he developed a philosophy of life—a religious life—in which God revolved around the moral life of human beings rather than the other way around.

This was Jefferson's religion, and it completely shaped his approach to both education and politics. For Jefferson the purpose of moral and intellectual maturation is to make possible life in a republic, and the purpose of a republic is to allow for the moral and intellectual maturation of individuals. A true republic is built on education, while education exists to make life in a republic possible. If a belief in God helps make this possible, wonderful. If individual maturity and republican virtue can be fashioned apart from belief in God, fine.

### Reason and the Moral Sense

Jefferson believed that schooling should teach children to understand the world in which they live. Careful observation of nature, habits of logical thought, and classics of literature are all essential in the development of rational independence. Like many other eighteenth-century intellectuals, Jefferson was thoroughly influenced by the Enlightenment, with confidence in reason and its growing disdain for the established practices and "myths" of "dogmatic religion."

Rationality, however, did not stand alone: individual maturation and the building of a republic required the development of the moral sense, the conscience. The moral sense was, for Jefferson, something of a sixth sense by which one could feel what is right and wrong. No one can escape such feelings, whether or not one becomes intellectually mature. When Jefferson penned the words in the Declaration of Independence that "We hold these truths to be self-evident" he was implying a moral self-evidence as much as an intellectual self-evidence. The moral sense was as much a part of human nature as the intellect.

John Dewey stressed this connection of the rational, the moral, and the natural in Jefferson. "To put ourselves in touch with Jefferson's position," he wrote, "we have therefore to translate the word 'natural' into moral."<sup>3</sup> When Jefferson talks about "the laws of nature or nature's God," or about reason and the rational order of the universe, he is not talking simply about physical and biological reality. He is also referring to the moral universe in which human beings ought to learn to live by both reason and conscience (the moral sense).

### Unalienable Rights, Moral Precepts, and Republican Virtue

Both reason and conscience lead us to the self-evidence of our "unalienable rights," according to Jefferson. These include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson never really argues these points but takes them for granted, for he genuinely believed them to be self-evident. And if people have these rights, then education must lead toward them to fulfill and enjoy them. Moreover, a republic exists as the means of realizing and protecting these rights, since that is why governments are instituted.

The fact that Jefferson refers in the Declaration of Independence to the Creator who endows us with "unalienable" rights tells us only a little about what Jefferson thinks of the Creator. What is most important is not the Creator but the rights that we have. Once again, one can see the seriousness of Jefferson's religious morality here. God is

3. John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Putnam, 1939), 155-56.

not ignored or discarded, but rather he seems to be pulled in as a support for human moral development.

In an 1809 letter Jefferson wrote:

Reading, reflection and time have convinced me that the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree . . . and that we should not intermeddle with the peculiar dogmas in which all religions differ, and which are totally unconnected with morality . . . The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, he (the Creator) has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain.<sup>4</sup>

Just as Jefferson tried to help his nephew to find "incitements to virtue," so he was concerned above all to help American citizens find reasons to practice a common morality. The "peculiar" dogmas about things such as God's Trinitarian or Unitarian nature, the meaning of baptism, the deity of Christ, and life after death are of little importance for the well-being of society and the practice of morality. From Jefferson's point of view, therefore, even God (if he exists) is concerned less about dogma than with morality. God obviously has not made "peculiar" dogmatic truth self-evident to human beings, since religions continue to differ about them. But God (if he exists) has made self-evident the precepts of basic morality in a way that does not depend on even different intellectual capabilities.

### The Dogmatism of all Faiths, Including Jefferson's

Two things most interest me about Jefferson's convictions here. The first is the dogmatic nature of those convictions—dogmatic in the sense that not all peoples of all times have agreed with Jefferson on the self-evident truthfulness of a common moral code. Moreover, many religious and nonreligious people have held other convictions to be more important than these supposedly common moral precepts. Thus Jefferson's Enlightenment conviction that a common moral sense provides everyone with a core of irreducible and self-evident truths is little more than a statement of his deepest faith, not a statement of fact. Jefferson believed deeply—it was essential to his religious faith—that a common core of moral truth existed and could be counted on to sustain social life. To those who did not or do not hold this belief, Jefferson's confidence can come as an insistent dogma of its own.

The word "religion," then, has two meanings in Jefferson's thinking. On the one hand it refers to the true faith of rational, natural morality—the way of life and belief followed by those who are preoccupied with the moral life of individuals in republican community. On the other hand, "religion" refers to the beliefs and practices of those groups and sects who hold differing and "peculiar" dogmas. Although Jefferson did not recognize his own religion as one among many, it was precisely that. The fact that Jefferson and his followers placed more and more emphasis on the common rational character of his religion in contrast to the sectarianism of other religions led to the widespread myth that Jefferson had laid the basis for a common secular philosophy of public life and public education. Other religions began to be treated as fit for private life but not for public life. The word "religion" eventually became disconnected from

4. Jefferson's letter to James Fishback, September 27, 1809, in Saul K. Padover, ed., *Democracy by Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1939), 177-78.



the view of life held by Jefferson and from the public educational system established by government in the United States. But this should not hide from us the fact that Jefferson's religion of republican morality was a faith with its own dogmatic essentials.

### Education in the Republic

The second thing that interests me about Jefferson here is that he never questioned the "self-evident truth" that a republic can be fashioned on the basis of this common morality and that education organized by government can lead all individuals into the same virtuous maturity. Jefferson's religious morality (or moral philosophy), in other words, depended on two interdependent poles—the free, rational, and moral individual, on the one hand, and the republic of common, universal moral purpose, on the other hand. Jefferson was so convinced of the universal character of the moral sense that he could not imagine that any individual peculiarities could lead people away from common agreement on core issues in a republic. At the same time, he was so convinced that true independence and freedom for individuals is to be found in a common moral and intellectual maturation that he saw no threat to republican unity coming from individual freedom.

According to David Little, Jefferson overlooked the problems of competing loyalties and possible conflicts among different interpretations of life precisely because he was blindly convinced that all disputes about diverse religious, moral, and civic opinions would be overcome within the universal association (the republic) of moral and rational individuals.<sup>5</sup> Quite evidently, Jefferson believed that a new universal community of moral faith would eventually displace the old dogmatic churches as guardians of the public trust. The new community would be the rational, moral republic.

But what would hold the republic together? How would the core of moral principles be instilled in all citizens so that they would grow into a common pursuit of happiness while allowing their peculiar dogmas to remain locked up in private? The answer, of course, was a new system of publicly directed education. Such a system did not exist in Jefferson's day. Different forms of education existed throughout the colonies and then the states, but universal schooling provided and directed by the government did not exist. Jefferson worked toward this ideal and greatly influenced Noah Webster, Benjamin Rush, and Horace Mann who laid the foundations for what we know as our system of public education.

As Sidney Mead shows so perceptively, the debate over religion in the United States in the nineteenth century became channeled in two directions—one over theological issues among particular churches and sects, and the other over the "cosmopolitan, universal theology of the Republic."<sup>6</sup> With the gradual disestablishment of churches and the rise of public education, says Mead,

The public schools in the United States took over one of the basic responsibilities that traditionally was always assumed by an established

5. David Little, "The Origins of Perplexity: Civil Religion and Moral Belief in the Thought of Thomas Jefferson," in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 200.
6. Sidney Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper Forum Books, 1975), 69.

church. In that sense the public-school system of the United States is its established church.

In this context one can understand why it is that the religion of many Americans is democracy—why their real faith is the “democratic faith”—the religion of the public schools.<sup>7</sup>

Today we might find it shocking to hear someone say that our public school system is the equivalent of an established church, teaching the correct moral dogmas and view of life to all children. Yet that is what Jefferson envisioned. He certainly wanted the schools to be free of those peculiar and sectarian dogmas that belong only in private. The public school system, with full legal backing from the U.S. Supreme Court, has so clearly identified “religion” with sectarian faiths and dogmas that Jefferson’s ideal of a common school system teaching a nonsectarian view of life has become fully institutionalized. Consequently, the battles that continue today over control of schools are frequently battles of faith—battles to control the shaping of the “democratic faith.” The relativism of competing faiths and dogmas is no longer confined in private, however, because the public does not share the common faith or morality anticipated by Jefferson. Jefferson’s belief that basic moral truths are self-evident and will be acknowledged by everyone seems not as universal as he thought.

### Our Contemporary Challenge

Perhaps what we need to do today is to return to a careful and critical study of Jefferson (and other early American founders) to explore the deep and profound character of his (and their) religious convictions. In Jefferson’s case, his religion was a moral and ethical faith, oriented toward individual maturation for life in a republic. Schooling was the key institution for both the individual and the republic. If Jefferson was wrong, or mistakenly dogmatic, then we need to uncover the foundational assumptions and convictions that led to his dogmatism. It would be a mistake to try to hold onto his views of organized schooling and organized republican life without appreciating the religious depth of his vision. They all hold together.

If, as seems evident, religion is important in the shaping of individuals and human institutions, then perhaps what we need is a new way of dealing openly and vigorously with the pluralism of religious views that shape education. And if schooling is truly shaped by different religious views of life, whether Christianity humanistic moralism, or any other, then perhaps we need to find a new framework of public pluralism for schools rather than continue with the dogmatism that one established common denominator can deliver all necessary truth to all citizens for a common life in this world.<sup>8</sup> In whatever ways we come to deal with the multitude of questions concerning religion and education in contemporary America, one thing is certain: we must seek to understand Thomas Jefferson. ■

7. Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 17, 20.

8. For more on Jefferson as well as the development of an argument for greater pluralism in public education, see Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Democracy and the Renewal of Public Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), and Rockne McCarthy, James Skillen, and William Harper, *Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).