## America’s Forgotten Classroom — Part 2

# Washington’s Future Warning to America: Religion, Morality, and the Myth of Secular Virtue

### What George Washington Tried to Teach America 230 Years Ago—and How We Are Still Ignoring His Warning

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## Opening the Door: America Is Still Arguing About What Belongs in the Classroom

If you want to understand how deeply divided America has become over religion, morality, government, and the classroom, consider two remarkable numbers from this year. In an April 2026 national survey, the Pew Research Center found that **52 percent of U.S. adults believed conservative Christians had gone too far trying to push their religious values into government and public schools, while 48 percent believed liberals who are not religious had gone too far trying to keep religious values out of government and public schools**. The

nationally representative survey included 3,592 adults and captured, almost perfectly, the tension at the center of this investigation. (Pew Research Center, How Americans Feel About Religion's Influence in Government and Public Life.)

One additional detail in the Pew survey makes the divide even more revealing: **18 percent of Americans agreed with both statements**, believing that conservative Christians have gone too far in pressing religious values into government and public schools **and** that nonreligious liberals have gone too far in trying to keep religious values out. That suggests a meaningful portion of the country does not see the problem simply as "too much religion" or "too much secularism," but as a struggle over how a pluralistic society can protect religious liberty without either governmental coercion or the unnecessary exclusion of religious conviction from public life. In that sense, the modern debate is already circling around a question Washington's generation also confronted: **how can government protect liberty of conscience while still recognizing the moral formation upon which self-government depends?**

Those nearly mirror-image numbers show that Americans are not merely debating whether religion is personally meaningful. We are asking whether religion's **presence** or its **absence** creates the greater difficulty in institutions shared by citizens with very different beliefs. Some contemporary approaches place considerable confidence in education, civics, critical reasoning, professional ethics, psychology, social norms, and law to cultivate moral behavior without appealing to transcendent religious authority. Others question whether a society can indefinitely retain a common moral architecture after becoming detached from the religious convictions that historically helped support it.

That debate would have sounded familiar to **George Washington (1732–1799), commander in chief of the Continental Army, presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention, and first president of the United States**, although the vocabulary surrounding it would have been very different. Many members of the American Founding generation did not oppose education; quite the opposite. They promoted knowledge vigorously, but they repeatedly distinguished between **educating the intellect** and **forming the moral character** of the person who possessed that education.

That is precisely why our second investigation into **America's Forgotten Classroom** takes us back exactly **230 years**, to September 19, 1796. On that Saturday, Washington's Farewell Address appeared in Philadelphia's *American Daily Advertiser*. He was preparing to leave the presidency after two terms, and rather than appearing before Congress to deliver a farewell speech, he sent a written message directly to his fellow citizens. The document was quickly reprinted and eventually became one of the best-known political texts of the early Republic. (Library of Congress, George Washington's Farewell Address: Primary Documents in American History.)

Washington was leaving public office, but he was still teaching. After a lifetime that had carried him through revolution, military command, constitutional formation, and the presidency, he attempted to tell generations he would never meet what he believed could preserve—or eventually endanger—the republican experiment they had created. Among his warnings about sectional division, political faction, foreign entanglements, public credit, and constitutional

government was one argument that sounds remarkably contemporary in the educational debates of 2026: **Washington did not believe a free republic could safely depend upon intellectual education alone while separating national morality from religious principle.**

# From Classroom 1 to Classroom 2: Information Was Never Enough

In **Part 1** of *America's Forgotten Classroom*, we entered an older understanding of education. The American classroom was not historically conceived merely as a place where information passed from teacher to student. Education was also concerned with formation—with literacy, citizenship, conscience, self-government, character, family responsibility, and the moral habits believed necessary for liberty.

The schoolhouse did not have to replace the family in order to reinforce what families, churches, and communities were already expected to cultivate. At its best, education complemented those institutions. Children learned to read, but reading opened books that taught them what human beings were, what duties accompanied freedom, how character was formed, and why liberty could not survive indefinitely if citizens were incapable of governing themselves.

Washington's Farewell Address takes that investigation one level deeper. If a republic requires citizens capable of governing themselves, we must ask what governs the person when the parent, teacher, employer, police officer, judge, president, and neighbor are no longer watching. Washington believed that question reached beneath constitutional structures into the moral character of the citizen.

# The President Who Chose to Walk Away From Power

The circumstances surrounding the Farewell Address are important because Washington was not campaigning for another term or positioning himself for another office. At sixty-four, after decades of military and political service, he wanted to return to Mount Vernon. His final message was therefore presented as the counsel of a retiring president who believed experience had taught him principles worth leaving to later generations.

The document itself did not suddenly appear in September 1796. It developed over approximately four years. When Washington contemplated retirement after his first presidential term in **1792**, he asked **James Madison (1751–1836), principal architect of the Constitution, major contributor to *The Federalist Papers*, future secretary of state, and fourth president of the United States**, to assist him in preparing a valedictory address. Madison produced a draft, but Washington eventually agreed to serve a second term, so the document was put aside. Four years later, Washington returned to the project and relied extensively upon **Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804), Revolutionary War officer, principal author of most of *The Federalist Papers*, Washington adviser, and first secretary of the Treasury**, in developing the address that would actually be published. (Library of Congress, Farewell Address Digital Collections and Drafting History.)

The Library of Congress summarizes the evidence carefully: the ideas expressed were Washington's, Hamilton wrote a large portion of the final address, and Madison had drafted the earlier version in 1792. The surviving documentary record further shows that Washington's farewell developed through consultation, drafting, reconsideration, and revision rather than appearing fully formed in a single sitting. (Library of Congress, George Washington’s Farewell Address.)

That collaborative process should not trouble modern readers. Presidents then, as now, depend upon advisers, secretaries, attorneys, policy specialists, researchers, and skilled writers to help develop consequential public documents. Presidential authorship has rarely meant that a chief executive personally composed every sentence without assistance; the more meaningful questions concern who directed the message, decided among competing drafts, approved the wording, and assumed public responsibility for the finished document.

In Washington's case, the progressive drafts actually make the Farewell Address more interesting because they allow us to observe his editorial judgment. Madison contributed to its earliest conception, Hamilton became the principal drafting collaborator in 1796, and Washington selected, revised, moderated, and approved what finally appeared before the American people.

That distinction becomes especially revealing when we reach the religion section, because Hamilton initially proposed wording even stronger than Washington ultimately chose to publish.

## The “Indispensable Supports” of Political Prosperity

Washington called religion and morality the **“indispensable supports”** of political prosperity. He described them as great pillars of human happiness and “firmest props” of the duties human beings owed as citizens. He went so far as to say that a person would claim the tribute of patriotism “in vain” while laboring to undermine those supports. (George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796 — Founders Online, National Archives.)

We should allow Washington's actual language to carry the argument rather than making him say more than he did. He did not use the modern phrase *secularize the Republic*, nor did he declare that every unbelieving person was incapable of patriotism. His argument was more precise:

deliberately undermining religion and morality meant weakening supports he considered essential to republican political prosperity.

Washington also insisted that this concern belonged not merely to clergymen or particularly devout citizens. The “mere Politician,” he wrote, had reason to respect religion and morality alongside the pious person. He was therefore making a civic argument as well as a religious one: even a statesman looking only at the practical requirements of government should recognize that a republic depends upon forms of moral conduct that governmental machinery cannot manufacture by itself. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Religion and Morality Passage.)

That places Washington in an interesting contrast with a common modern instinct. Contemporary discussions frequently ask what institutions can do to encourage ethical behavior through regulations, education, professional standards, incentives, and enforcement. Washington certainly believed institutions mattered, but he began further beneath them: he wanted to know what formed the human beings who would eventually operate those institutions.

# Washington Takes Us into the Courtroom

Washington then moved from general political philosophy into a place where his theory could actually be tested: the courtroom. What security remained for property, reputation, and life, he asked, if the sense of **religious obligation** disappeared from the oaths used as instruments of investigation in courts of justice? (George Washington, Farewell Address — Founders Online.)

His reasoning becomes clearer when we imagine the eighteenth-century courtroom. A judge can administer an oath, but the judge cannot climb inside the witness's conscience. Government can

punish perjury when a lie is discovered, yet no government can place a police officer inside every human mind. At some point, every legal system depends upon human beings telling the truth even when deception might benefit them and even when they believe earthly authorities may never discover what they have done.

For Washington's generation, an oath therefore represented more than courtroom procedure. It placed the witness beneath an accountability transcending the court itself. If a person believed an all-knowing God remained a witness after every human witness disappeared, then the obligation to tell the truth possessed a moral sanction extending beyond the power of civil government.

None of this means religious people never lie or that unbelievers cannot be truthful. History supplies far too many examples of religious hypocrisy to sustain such a simplistic conclusion. Washington's concern was the **moral authority behind an oath** and the degree to which every free society ultimately depends upon conscience performing work that police, judges, and statutes cannot continually perform.

That is where his political argument begins turning directly into an educational question: **what forms that conscience before the witness ever enters the courtroom?**

## The Government Outside—and the Government Inside

A free society therefore depends upon something like two forms of government. One operates outside the person through constitutions, statutes, judges, legislatures, elections, courts, and law enforcement. The other operates inside through conscience, self-restraint, moral obligation, and the capacity to govern one's own passions.

A highly coercive state can attempt to compensate for weak internal restraint by increasing surveillance, punishment, regulation, and force. A republic deliberately leaves citizens substantial room for liberty, which means citizens must exercise substantial restraint from within. If people increasingly refuse to govern greed, rage, appetite, revenge, dishonesty, ambition, and the abuse of power, pressure for greater external control naturally increases.

**The Founding-era concern was therefore not merely whether government possessed enough power to restrain wrongdoing, but whether citizens possessed enough character that government would not need to exercise that power constantly. John Adams (1735–1826),** revolutionary statesman, diplomat, political theorist, first vice president, and second president of the United States, later stated the principle with extraordinary force while serving as president. Writing to the Massachusetts Militia in 1798, he warned that no government possessed enough power to contend successfully with human passions when they were no longer restrained by morality and religion; avarice, ambition, revenge, and other passions, he said, could break through "the strongest Cords of our Constitution." His point was not that constitutional structure was unimportant, but almost the reverse: **constitutional restraints themselves depended upon human beings sufficiently governed from within to respect the restraints placed upon them from without.** (John Adams, From John Adams to the Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798 — Founders Online, National Archives.)

Adams made the same point in another 1798 letter when he wrote that free government had to be organized with close attention to **"the nature of man"** and to the interests and passions operating within society. He warned that powerful collective passions could break down the barriers of "modesty, decency, & morality," leaving government to restrain them increasingly through force. In other words, the constitutional problem was never only how to design better institutions; it was also how to sustain a people whose character kept those institutions from having to become more coercive. That is precisely the difference between **government from the outside** and **self-government from within**. (John Adams, Letter to Jonathan DeWitt, September 22, 1798 — Founders Online

Adams expressed substantially the same concern twenty years before Washington's Farewell Address. Writing to his cousin **Zabdiel Adams (1739–1801), Congregational minister and Harvard-educated clergyman**, on June 21, 1776—less than two weeks before the Declaration of Independence—Adams wrote that statesmen could plan and speculate about liberty, but **"Religion and Morality alone"** could establish the principles upon which freedom could securely stand. He immediately added that "the only foundation of a free Constitution, is pure Virtue," warning that people might change rulers and forms of government without obtaining lasting liberty if they lacked sufficient moral character. (John Adams, Letter to Zabdiel Adams, June 21, 1776 — Founders Online.)

Adams was not outlining a national church establishment. He was discussing the moral conditions beneath constitutional freedom. Political institutions could be redesigned repeatedly, he argued, but a free constitution could not permanently compensate for a people incapable of governing themselves.

That brings us to a word the Founders used constantly but many Americans rarely use today with the same meaning.

## What Did the Founders Mean by “Virtue”?

The eighteenth-century word **virtue** can sound archaic. Modern readers may hear it and think principally of niceness, private respectability, or simply refraining from obvious wrongdoing. In the Founders' republican vocabulary, however, virtue carried considerably greater civic weight.

Virtue meant **moral character sufficiently disciplined to govern one's passions and, in public life, to place justice, duty, and the legitimate rights of others above immediate private advantage when those interests collided**. A free citizen could possess private ambitions, interests, property, and strong opinions, but liberty could not survive if every citizen treated personal appetite as the highest law.

John Adams expressed this moral world through classical virtues such as **prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude**. In his August 1796 diary, he connected those virtues explicitly with Christian moral instruction and the formation of citizens from childhood onward. (John Adams, Diary, August 14, 1796 — Founders Online.)

Translated into ordinary experience, virtue means telling the truth when lying would be profitable, restraining appetite when indulgence would injure another person, exercising justice when favoritism would be easier, honoring a promise after breaking it has become advantageous, and respecting another citizen's rights when doing so brings no immediate benefit to oneself. It is the internal character that makes extensive external liberty possible.

That helps explain what Washington meant when he described **“virtue or morality”** as a “necessary spring of popular government.” He was not offering an ornamental compliment about respectable behavior. He was saying that republican government requires human beings capable of exercising freedom without continually converting liberty into license and even licentiousness. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Virtue and Popular Government.)

In modern language, we might translate Founding-era civic virtue as **moral character, self-government, and public responsibility working together**. Once that definition is recovered, Washington's next statement about education becomes considerably more important.

## Then Washington Turned Directly to Education

Washington cautioned Americans against assuming that morality could be maintained without religion. He acknowledged that what he called **“refined education”** might influence “minds of peculiar structure,” but then concluded that “reason & experience” did not justify expecting **national morality** to prevail while religious principle was excluded. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Religion, Morality, and Refined Education.)

Notice carefully what Washington did not say. He was not attacking education. Elsewhere in the same address, he urged Americans to promote institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge because republican government gives unusual influence to public opinion and therefore requires an enlightened citizenry. Washington praised education in the same document in which he warned that education by itself could not safely be assumed to sustain national morality. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Founders Online.)

His argument was consequently never **religion instead of education**. It was that **education and moral formation were not identical**, and a republic needed both.

That position contrasts with a common modern expectation. Contemporary discussions often look toward better curricula, civics instruction, professional ethics, critical reasoning, social-emotional education, psychology, or institutional safeguards as mechanisms for producing responsible conduct. Each may contribute something valuable, but Washington's question came one level earlier: what gives the moral principles being taught their binding authority when obeying them becomes costly?

A school can produce technological sophistication without deciding whether technology should be used to exploit or protect human beings. It can teach rhetoric without producing honesty, economics without producing integrity, law without creating justice, and science without settling the moral responsibilities of scientists. Education expands what people are capable of doing, but enlarged capability does not automatically settle what they **ought** to do with that power.

Washington was therefore wrestling with the difference between an **educated mind** and a **formed conscience**. He believed the two should coexist, but he did not assume the first automatically produced the second.

## Washington Was Not Alone: Could Knowledge by Itself Conquer Human Passions?

Washington was hardly the only Founder wrestling with this distinction. John Adams was an enthusiastic advocate of education, yet he did not believe that increased knowledge automatically

subdued appetite, selfishness, prejudice, or passion. An educated human being remained a human being, still capable of placing considerable intelligence at the service of destructive desires.

That represents an important contrast with the more optimistic modern assumption that ignorance is the principal cause of immoral conduct and that sufficient education will therefore steadily produce moral improvement. Adams certainly believed ignorance was dangerous, but ignorance was not humanity's only problem. Human beings could know a great deal and still choose badly.

Only a few years later, that same concern emerged with startling clarity in the writings of another Founder whose professional life demonstrated that he was anything but hostile to education.

# Benjamin Rush: “Without Religion … Learning Does Real Mischief”

**Benjamin Rush (1746–1813), physician, professor of medicine, signer of the Declaration of Independence, social reformer, and one of the early Republic's most prolific advocates of education**, may provide the single strongest companion statement to Washington's warning about “refined education.” Rush embraced science, medicine, schooling, and intellectual advancement, making his warning particularly significant.

Writing to **John Armstrong Sr. (1717–1795), Pennsylvania physician, frontier military officer, and Revolutionary War general**, on March 19, 1783, while discussing a proposed college at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Rush made an extraordinary statement: **“Religion is necessary to correct the effects of learning. Without religion I believe learning does real mischief to the morals and principles of mankind.”** (Benjamin Rush, Letter to John Armstrong, March 19, 1783 — The Founders’ Constitution, University of Chicago.)

Read carefully, Rush was not saying ignorance was preferable to education. His life makes such an interpretation impossible. He was arguing that **learning enlarges human capacity without automatically correcting human character**. Greater intellectual ability allows a person to reason more effectively, communicate more persuasively, organize more efficiently, acquire greater power, and influence many more people. Those capacities can serve extraordinary good, but they can also give extraordinary effectiveness to selfish or destructive motives.

That is why Rush's warning belongs so naturally beside Washington's. Washington cautioned that refined education should not be expected to sustain national morality in exclusion of religious principle. Rush went one step further and warned that education morally disconnected from religion might not merely fail to produce virtue; it could actually give greater effectiveness to vice.

The contrast with modern assumptions is striking. We frequently speak as though more information, more schooling, more expertise, and more sophisticated technology must represent moral progress alongside intellectual progress. Rush separated those questions sharply. Knowledge can increase human ability; whether that ability is used justly depends upon something more than technical competence.

When we eventually reach artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nuclear science, sophisticated finance, social-media algorithms, and other modern forms of human power, Rush's eighteenth-century warning sounds surprisingly contemporary. **The ability to do something and the moral wisdom to determine whether it should be done remain two different forms of judgment.**

## An Extraordinary Document Five Weeks Before Washington's Farewell

The parallel becomes even more compelling when we move forward to **August 14, 1796**, only about five weeks before Washington's *Farewell Address* appeared.

On that Sunday, John Adams recorded a remarkable reflection in his diary about Christianity, education, and public morality. Christianity, he wrote, carried the principles of loving one's neighbor and treating others as one wished to be treated throughout society, reaching children, servants, women, and men. He then made the striking observation that **"No other Institution for Education, no kind of political Discipline"** could diffuse this kind of necessary moral information so universally among all ranks of citizens. (John Adams, Diary, August 14, 1796 — Founders Online.)

Adams immediately connected that Christian instruction with the **"Duties and Rights"** of human beings and citizens, taught from early infancy. He named prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude and connected those virtues with present conduct and future accountability. Christianity, in Adams's description, was therefore not merely private devotion; it functioned as an enormous moral educational system carrying concepts of duty, restraint, justice, and neighbor-love throughout society.

Adams's diary becomes even more pointed in the very next sentence. He wrote that through Christian instruction, **“The Duties and Rights of The Man and the Citizen are thus taught, from early Infancy to every Creature,”** and then added that the sanctions of a future life reinforced civil, political, domestic, and private duties. That is an unusually compact description of the educational philosophy we have been tracing: moral formation began early, joined rights to duties, extended beyond the classroom into the whole person, and placed civic conduct beneath an accountability larger than government itself.

The timing is extraordinary. In August 1796, Adams was privately describing Christianity as a form of moral education no merely political discipline could spread so universally. In September, Washington publicly warned that refined education should not be expected to sustain national morality once religious principle was excluded.

We do not need to imagine that Adams and Washington secretly coordinated these statements. Their similarity is historically more revealing than that. Both men were drawing upon a much broader Founding-era world in which **education, religion, morality, character, and republican liberty naturally belonged in the same conversation**.

## Benjamin Rush’s Positive Case: Education Needed a Moral Center

Rush later made the positive side of his position equally clear. Writing to **Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826),** principal author of the Declaration of Independence, diplomat, political theorist, founder of the University of Virginia, and third president of the United States, in August 1800, he said he had **“always considered Christianity as the strong ground of Republicanism.”** He

connected Christianity with republican liberty and equality as well as simplicity, integrity, and economy in government. (Benjamin Rush, Letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 22, 1800 — Founders Online.)

Rush is particularly useful because he helps us avoid forcing the Founders into a false choice between religious influence and religious freedom. Only weeks later he told Jefferson that he agreed with keeping **"religion and government independant of each Other"** and argued that Christianity did not need support from human government. (Benjamin Rush, Letter to Thomas Jefferson, October 6, 1800 — Founders Online.)

Those positions fit together when we distinguish the **moral influence of religion upon society** from the **coercive establishment of religion by government**. Modern Americans sometimes collapse those propositions into one another, assuming that acknowledging religion's public importance necessarily implies government-imposed religion. Many members of the Founding generation did not reason that way.

Washington, Adams, and Rush could therefore be enthusiastic advocates of education and simultaneously reject the proposition that knowledge alone solved the moral problem of human beings.

# A Brief Glimpse Ahead: The Northwest Ordinance

There is one more piece of evidence that belongs in this investigation, although we should deliberately resist giving it the full treatment here because it deserves and will be given its own classroom later in this series.

Nine years before Washington's Farewell Address, the Confederation Congress enacted the **Northwest Ordinance of 1787**. Article III placed three concepts together that modern debates often separate: **"Religion, morality and knowledge."** It declared them necessary to good government and human happiness before directing that schools and the means of education should forever be encouraged. (Library of Congress, Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Article III.)

We will return to that extraordinary document later in *America's Forgotten Classroom*, where it deserves a full investigation of the relationship among religion, morality, knowledge, government, human happiness, schools, and education. For the moment, its significance is narrower but unmistakable: Washington's refusal to treat education as morally self-sufficient was not occurring in isolation; it belonged to a broader Founding-era conversation about what education was expected to accomplish.

That is enough to place the Ordinance on the evidence table without giving away the classroom reserved for it later in this series.

## Hamilton's Draft Was Even Stronger Than Washington's Final Language

The evolution of the *Farewell Address* gives us another revealing piece of evidence. In Alexander Hamilton's 1796 draft, the religious argument was actually stronger than the wording Washington finally published.

Hamilton contemplated asking whether national morality could survive without the assistance of a **"generally received and divinely authoritative Religion."** Washington did not retain that

exact formulation. Instead, the final *Farewell Address* used the more measured language that religion and morality were indispensable supports and that national morality should not be expected to prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

That distinction matters because careful history should never attribute Hamilton's discarded wording to Washington. Yet its appearance inside the drafting process demonstrates that the relationship among religious authority, national morality, and republican government was being explicitly debated among the men developing Washington's final address.

The evolution of the document therefore strengthens rather than weakens our understanding of Washington's position. We can compare the stronger formulation Hamilton proposed with the more restrained wording Washington ultimately authorized, allowing us to see precisely how far the retiring president chose to go publicly.

Washington moderated Hamilton's language while preserving the central argument beneath it.

## Washington Was Part of a Larger Founding-Era Chorus

By this point, the pattern is difficult to dismiss as the private eccentricity of one retiring president. John Adams said religion and morality supplied principles upon which freedom could securely stand. Benjamin Rush warned that learning separated from religion could produce “real mischief” in morals and principles. Adams later described Christianity as a moral educational system whose influence no merely political discipline could spread so universally, while Hamilton proposed an even stronger connection between national morality and divinely authoritative religion.

These figures did not possess identical theology, and their differences should not be erased. Some were more conventionally orthodox than others, and they did not agree perfectly about denominations, church establishments, biblical interpretation, or the proper relationship between governmental authority and religious institutions.

Yet that diversity makes their area of agreement more interesting. Across substantial theological differences, many leading figures repeatedly returned to the conviction that **constitutional arrangements alone could not preserve republican liberty**. Institutions ultimately depended upon people possessing enough internal moral government to use freedom responsibly.

Modern culture frequently places great confidence in procedures, expertise, professional credentials, administrative safeguards, and institutional design. The Founding argument we are uncovering did not reject those things. It asked a more basic question: **what kind of person will operate them?** A beautifully designed system remains vulnerable when the human beings exercising its powers abandon restraint.

## Yet Washington Did Not Want a Single Denominational National Church

At this stage an obvious objection must be confronted. If Washington considered religion indispensable to political prosperity, does that mean he wanted the federal government to establish Christianity or compel religious belief?

Washington's own correspondence points in another direction.

In August 1790, the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, Rhode Island, wrote to the president regarding religious liberty. Washington responded with one of the most celebrated statements about freedom of conscience in early American history, declaring that the United States government gave "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." He also rejected the notion that religious toleration should merely be regarded as an indulgence granted by one class of people to another, framing religious liberty instead in terms of inherent rights and equal citizenship. (George Washington, Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August 18, 1790 — Founders Online.)

The same Washington who defended Jewish religious liberty in 1790 told the nation six years later that religion and morality were indispensable supports of political prosperity. Those propositions were not contradictory to him because he did not equate religious influence with religious coercion.

Another private letter makes Washington's practical tolerance even clearer. Seeking skilled workmen for Mount Vernon in 1784, Washington told Tench Tilghman (1744–1786), Continental Army officer, trusted aide-de-camp to Washington, and Maryland merchant, that the workers could come from Asia, Africa, or Europe and might be Muslims—he used the eighteenth-century term "Mahometans"—Jews, Christians "of any Sect," or even atheists, provided they were capable workers of suitable character. (George Washington, Letter to Tench Tilghman, March 24, 1784 — Founders Online.)

Washington made this balance especially clear in his correspondence with American churches. Writing to the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1789, he said he hoped people of **"every denomination"** would recognize him as a **"faithful and impartial Patron of genuine, vital religion,"** while in the same letter affirming his desire to preserve the nation's "civil and religious liberties." In a separate reply to the Presbyterian General Assembly, he wrote that the "general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry and œconomy" was particularly necessary to the country's happiness. Washington's position was therefore not that government should impose religion, but that a free government could protect religious liberty while still regarding religiously formed virtues as socially valuable. (George Washington, Letter to the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, May 29, 1789 — Founders Online; George Washington, Letter to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, May 30–June 5, 1789 — Founders Online.)

That combination is important because Washington did not treat religious liberty as a reason to strip religion of all public significance. His letters suggest instead that he could defend equal freedom of conscience while also speaking favorably about the moral effects of piety, honesty, industry, benevolence, and responsible citizenship. In his framework, protecting citizens from religious coercion and recognizing religion's contribution to public character were not opposing ideas; they were parts of the same republican order.

This is why two opposite caricatures of Washington should be avoided. He was neither a modern advocate for eliminating religion from public moral reasoning nor a theocrat attempting to impose one denomination through federal power. The historical Washington occupied more

complicated ground: strong religious liberty alongside a strong conviction that religion contributed fundamentally to republican moral life.

## Non-Establishment Was Not the Same Thing as Religious Irrelevance

This is critical to understand: Washington and the other Founders' concern was not generally that Christianity itself had to be excluded from federal life, but that the new national government should not replicate the English model by giving one church or denomination privileged legal authority over everyone else. England had long linked public office and the established Church of England, including religious tests that required conformity to the state church. The American Constitution rejected that model at the federal level through Article VI's prohibition on religious tests, and the First Amendment later barred Congress from establishing religion. At the same time, the states themselves still varied considerably, and several retained forms of religious establishment for years afterward, which is why it is more accurate to speak of a rejection of a federally privileged church rather than an immediate nationwide separation of religion from public life. (Library of Congress, Historical Background on Religious Tests for Government Offices — Constitution Annotated; Library of Congress, State-Established Religion in the Colonies — Constitution Annotated.)

That is why Article VI of the Constitution prohibited a religious test for federal office, while the First Amendment subsequently prohibited Congress from making a law respecting an establishment of religion and protected free religious exercise. Those provisions placed meaningful limits upon federal religious authority, but they did not require Washington, Adams, Rush, churches, schools, or citizens to regard religion as socially irrelevant.

Modern debates sometimes collapse several separate questions. Whether government should establish a national church is one question. Whether citizens may bring religious convictions into public life is another. Whether religion contributes to public morality is a third, while whether schools may accurately teach religion's historical influence is yet another.

The Founding generation could answer those questions differently without contradiction. Washington could oppose persecution and compulsory religious conformity while believing that religious conviction strengthened the conscience of citizens. Rush could regard Christianity as a strong moral support of republican government while rejecting the proposition that Christianity required governmental support.

That distinction is central to understanding Washington's educational warning. If government itself was not supposed to manufacture religious faith through coercion, then much of the formative work necessarily occurred elsewhere—in families, churches, schools, voluntary associations, communities, and individual consciences.

# Thomas Jefferson: What Did the “Great Separatist” Think Religion Contributed to Society?

This investigation is centered upon **George Washington’s Farewell Address**, not Thomas Jefferson. Yet before leaving the Founding-era debate over religion, morality, education, and republican government, one figure warrants special attention precisely because he is so frequently invoked as the counterexample to Washington’s position. **Thomas Jefferson** became the Founder most famously associated with the separation of church and state, and his phrase **“a wall of separation between Church & State”** remains one of the most quoted expressions in the American debate over religion and government. If even Jefferson distinguished between

opposing religious establishment and eliminating religion's moral influence from society, that distinction deserves a place in this investigation. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, January 1, 1802 — Library of Congress.)

Jefferson's personal theology departed sharply from historic Christian orthodoxy, particularly concerning the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, miracles, and other doctrines central to traditional Christianity. But when Jefferson separated what he considered later theological additions from the moral teachings of Jesus themselves, his praise became extraordinary. Writing to Joseph Priestley in April 1803, Jefferson described Jesus' moral system as **"the most benevolent & sublime probably that has been ever taught"** and said it was "eminently more perfect" than the systems of the ancient philosophers. Whatever one concludes about Jefferson's theology, this is hardly the language of a man who regarded the moral teachings of Christianity as socially worthless. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803 — Founders Online.)

Only twelve days later, Jefferson wrote Benjamin Rush that portrayals of him as hostile to Christianity badly misrepresented his position. "To the corruptions of Christianity," he explained, "I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself." He then described himself as **"sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others."** Orthodox Christians would certainly disagree with Jefferson's attempt to separate Jesus' ethical teachings from many of Christianity's theological claims, but the historical point remains important: the Founder most associated with church-state separation nevertheless attached exceptional moral value to the teachings of Jesus. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803 — Founders Online.)

Jefferson's presidential conduct makes that distinction even more interesting. On **January 1, 1802**, he sent the Danbury Baptists his celebrated letter describing the First Amendment as building a **"wall of separation between Church & State."** Yet according to the Library of Congress, Jefferson was already attending voluntary Christian worship services in the House of Representatives, and on Sunday, January 3—only two days after the Danbury letter—he attended a service in the Capitol where Baptist preacher John Leland preached. Jefferson continued attending Capitol services during his presidency, and **James Madison later followed the same practice—and neither thought these services violated the First Amendment**! The services were voluntary and nondiscriminatory; ministers from differing Protestant denominations preached there, Catholic priests later participated, and worship in the House continued until after the Civil War. Jefferson also permitted religious services in executive-branch buildings, while preaching occurred in the Supreme Court chamber. The Library of Congress concludes that Jefferson and Madison were thereby giving **"symbolic support to religion as a prop for republican government."** (Library of Congress, Religion and the Federal Government, Part 2 — Jefferson and Madison.)

Nor was the Capitol service an isolated exception. During Jefferson's presidency, Christian congregations were also permitted to hold worship services in executive-branch buildings, including the Treasury and War Department, and contemporary records describe communion services lasting several hours. Christian preaching also took place in the Supreme Court chamber. The Library of Congress concludes that Jefferson and Madison, while firmly rejecting a federally established church, nevertheless offered religion substantial "symbolic support" and

permitted federal facilities to be used voluntarily by different denominations. That practice is difficult to reconcile with the idea that Jefferson understood his "wall of separation" to require Christianity's exclusion from the federal public square; his distinction was between governmental establishment and voluntary religious activity, not between government property and the mere presence of Christianity**.** (Library of Congress, Religion and the Federal Government, Part 2 — Jefferson and Madison; Library of Congress, Faith of Our Forefathers — Jefferson and Madison.)

Jefferson's own proposal for the first Great Seal of the United States points in the same direction. On July 4, 1776, Congress appointed Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin to design a national seal. Jefferson initially proposed an explicitly biblical scene of the "Children of Israel in the Wilderness," led by the cloud and pillar of fire, and then embraced Franklin's even more dramatic design showing Moses at the Red Sea as Pharaoh's army was overwhelmed, with the motto "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." Congress ultimately rejected that elaborate design, but the proposal itself is revealing: Jefferson was willing to employ unmistakably Judeo-Christian biblical imagery in a proposed official emblem of the new federal union. The Library of Congress specifically notes that Jefferson and Franklin were among the more theologically liberal Founders, yet still turned naturally to biblical symbolism for this national purpose. If Jefferson was so concerned with separating Judeo-Christianity from the federal government, would he have recommended this? **(**Library of Congress, Religion and the Congress of the Confederation — Proposed Seal for the United States; Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson: Establishing a Federal Republic — "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God".)

Jefferson's record in Virginia points in the same direction. In 1779, while serving as governor, he issued an official proclamation appointing December 9 as a public day of "thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God." He urged Virginians to set the day apart for those purposes and specifically called upon "the several Ministers of religion" to gather their congregations, assist them in prayer, preach to them, and perform the sacred duties appropriate to the occasion. Jefferson later opposed presidential proclamations of national fasts and thanksgivings on constitutional grounds because he believed the federal government lacked that delegated power, but his own gubernatorial action demonstrates that his objection was not to public Christianity itself. It was bound up with his federalism and establishment concerns—who possessed the governmental authority to act, and whether government was compelling or privileging a religious sect. **(Thomas Jefferson, Proclamation Appointing a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer, November 11, 1779 — Founders Online.)**

That sequence is revealing because it prevents us from reading Jefferson's "wall" as though it necessarily meant religious expression had to disappear from federal property or public life. Jefferson's own explanation of the Danbury correspondence to Attorney General Levi Lincoln emphasized his opposition to an **"alliance between church and state"** and his desire to articulate constitutional limits upon federal religious authority. His conduct in the Capitol nevertheless demonstrates that he could distinguish governmental establishment from voluntary religious activity taking place in a public building. The issue for Jefferson was not simply whether Christianity was visible in public life, but whether government possessed authority to impose, privilege, or regulate religious belief. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Levi Lincoln, January 1, 1802 — Founders Online.)

Jefferson's accompanying comparison of Jesus with ancient philosophers makes his distinction still clearer. He credited the classical philosophers with important insights about controlling human passions, but argued that Jesus' moral teaching reached further. Jefferson wrote that Jesus' teaching was **"more pure & perfect"** and praised its "universal philanthropy," extending love, charity, peace, and mutual obligation beyond family and countrymen to humanity generally. He also believed Jesus pushed morality inward, beyond outward conduct and into the motives and thoughts of the human heart. (Thomas Jefferson, Doctrines of Jesus Compared with Others, April 21, 1803 — Founders Online.)

Jefferson became even more explicit about the relationship between morality and society in 1809. Writing to James Fishback, he declared that **"the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts"** upon which religions agree, naming prohibitions against murder, theft, plunder, and false witness. He then wrote that **"we all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus"** and said that nowhere were they delivered "in greater purity than in his discourses." Jefferson's emphasis was therefore not that society should become morally neutral, but that government should avoid imposing disputed theological dogmas while society still depended upon moral conduct. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Fishback, September 27, 1809 — Founders Online.)

Jefferson's administration also participated in arrangements that complicate the idea that his "wall" prohibited every governmental action touching religion. In the **1803 treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians**, which Jefferson formally transmitted to the Senate, the United States agreed to provide **$100 annually for seven years toward the support of a Catholic priest** who would perform his religious duties and educate the tribe's children, along with **$300 toward constructing a church**. The Kaskaskias were already attached to Catholicism, so this was a treaty accommodation to a Native people rather than an attempt to establish Catholicism nationally. Even so, the episode demonstrates that Jefferson did not interpret non-establishment as an absolute prohibition upon every federal expenditure connected to religious ministry or a religious building. (Thomas Jefferson, Message to the Senate, October 31, 1803 — Founders Online.)

That point should be stated precisely. Jefferson did **not** create a general federal missionary program, and the Kaskaskia treaty should not be represented that way. What the documentary record establishes is more specific and more defensible: his administration carried out treaty obligations that supported a Catholic priest and helped construct a church for a Native community whose members were already Catholic. That arrangement is significant because it shows again that Jefferson's opposition to establishment did not require government to behave as though religion could never be accommodated under any circumstance. (Thomas Jefferson, Message to the Senate, October 31, 1803 — Founders Online.)

Jefferson returned repeatedly to the distinction between theological sectarianism and moral obligation. Writing to George Logan in 1816, he reduced what he considered the moral essence of religion to **"fear god and love thy neighbor."** In the same letter he connected morality directly with government, arguing that public officials acting collectively remained subject to the same moral laws binding individuals. "The man who is dishonest as a statesman," Jefferson wrote, "would be a dishonest man in any station." His hostility toward sectarian conflict

therefore did not amount to an argument that government or public life could dispense with moral accountability. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to George Logan, November 12, 1816 — Founders Online.)

Three years later Jefferson drew the distinction with almost laboratory precision. Writing to Presbyterian minister Ezra Stiles Ely in 1819, he distinguished **"that branch of religion which regards the moralities of life, and the duties of a social being"** from disputed theological dogmas. On the former, Jefferson told Ely, they did not differ: it taught people **"to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to do good to all men."** They might disagree profoundly over Calvinism and other theological doctrines, but Jefferson believed they shared the moral principles governing human relationships. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Ezra Stiles Ely, June 25, 1819 — Founders Online.)

Taken together, these episodes make Jefferson considerably more complicated than the simple image of a Founder seeking to remove Christianity from American public life. He opposed a federally established denomination and governmental coercion of conscience, yet he attended voluntary Christian worship in the Capitol, permitted worship services in federal buildings, repeatedly praised the moral teachings of Jesus, and administered treaty obligations that included financial support for a Catholic priest and construction of a church. The Library of Congress itself observes that although Jefferson and Madison are often regarded as less hospitable to religion than earlier presidents, both offered religion substantial symbolic support while in office. (Library of Congress, Religion and the Federal Government, Part 1; Library of Congress, Religion and the Federal Government, Part 2 — Jefferson and Madison.)

Jefferson therefore becomes an unusually revealing witness for the distinction this entire Classroom has been uncovering. **Washington emphasized religion and morality as indispensable supports of political prosperity; Jefferson emphasized protection from religious establishment while simultaneously elevating the moral teachings of Jesus as exceptionally important guides to human conduct.** They were not advancing identical arguments, and their substantial theological differences should not be erased. But Jefferson demonstrates that opposition to an established church did not logically require opposition to Christianity's moral influence upon citizens and society.

Indeed, Jefferson may sharpen the distinction better than almost anyone else in the Founding generation. He resisted **sectarian coercion, governmental control of theology, compulsory creeds, and privileged ecclesiastical authority**, while still affirming that society required morality and repeatedly identifying the moral teachings of Jesus as unusually pure and powerful. His preferred Christianity was stripped of doctrines orthodox Christians regard as essential, so it would be historically inaccurate to make Jefferson a spokesman for conventional evangelical Christianity. But it would be equally inaccurate to turn his famous "wall of separation" into a wall separating American society from every public influence of Christian moral teaching.

In that sense, the so-called **"great separatist"** complicates the assumption that religious liberty and religious moral influence must move in opposite directions. Jefferson wanted conscience protected from governmental coercion while still believing that love of neighbor, honesty, justice, restraint, and the moral teachings of Jesus were profoundly relevant to civilized

society. **His disagreement with Washington was therefore considerably more complicated than "religious America" versus "secular America." The disagreement involved establishment, authority, sectarian doctrine, and coercion—not whether a free society could safely dispense with moral formation altogether.**

## Christianity Was the Dominant Religious Environment

Acknowledging Jefferson's or Washington's religious endorsements do not warrant erasing Christianity from the world in which he lived. The Founding generation inhabited a culture profoundly shaped by Christian churches, biblical language, sermons, Protestant traditions, devotional practices, Christian colleges, and centuries of theological argument.

Christianity was certainly not the **only** intellectual influence upon American political thought. Classical republicanism, English constitutionalism, common law, natural-law reasoning, Enlightenment philosophy, and colonial political experience also mattered enormously. But eliminating Christianity from the picture would distort the historical environment.

The demographics help us understand why. The first federal census did not record religious affiliation, so there is no legitimate 1790 government table assigning precise percentages to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous religions, or unbelief. However, non-Christian religions' presence among the 13 colonies was very small—smaller than most might assume today.

Judaism provides one of the relatively few useful estimates. The Library of Congress places America's Jewish population in **1776 between approximately 1,000 and 2,500 people out of a total population of roughly 2.5 million in the thirteen colonies—only about 0.04 to 0.10**

**percent of the population**. Judaism was therefore numerically tiny, which makes Washington's later Newport letter all the more significant: one of the country's smallest religious minorities nevertheless received an explicit presidential affirmation of equal religious liberty. (Library of Congress, From Haven to Home: Jewish Life in America — 1700s Timeline.)

Islam was also present in early America, but particularly small and almost exclusively among enslaved West Africans, but here the numbers are much less certain. The Library of Congress states that there may have been **"hundreds, perhaps thousands" of Muslims in the United States in 1776**, brought largely as enslaved people from African regions where Islam flourished. If that broad description is expressed against a total population of roughly 2.5 million, **500 Muslims would equal about 0.02 percent, 1,000 about 0.04 percent, 2,000 about 0.08 percent, and even 5,000 only about 0.20 percent of the population**—but the Library of Congress does **not** provide a precise Muslim total, so those percentages should be understood only as illustrations of the possible scale, not as an official 1776 estimate. Some scholarship suggests that a significant minority of Africans transported through the Atlantic slave trade came from Muslim backgrounds, but that percentage cannot simply be applied to the roughly 500,000 enslaved people living in the colonies, many of whom had been born in North America or had experienced generations of religious disruption and forced assimilation. The most historically responsible conclusion is therefore that Muslims were genuinely present in Revolutionary-era America, perhaps numbering in the hundreds or thousands, but their exact number—and especially the number still actively practicing Islam—cannot be recovered with confidence. (Library of Congress, The Founding Fathers and Islam.)

**There is also no evidence of a purpose-built mosque anywhere in the thirteen colonies during the Founding era; organized mosque life in the United States emerged much later, with the first building specifically designed and constructed as a Muslim house of worship—the Mother Mosque of America in Cedar Rapids, Iowa—completed in 1934.** The Smithsonian and National Park Service nevertheless document clear cases of enslaved Muslims who continued to pray, preserve Islamic practices, write Arabic, and identify themselves as followers of Islam. Because the federal census did not record religion and enslaved Muslims generally lacked the freedom to establish enduring religious institutions, these historical estimates should not be converted into a supposedly precise percentage of Americans actively practicing Islam in 1790. (U.S. National Park Service, Roger Williams and Enslaved Muslims in the American Colonies; U.S. National Park Service, The Mother Mosque of America.)

Traditional Indigenous religions were likewise extensive among Native peoples and obviously cannot be described as nonexistent. Yet much of Native America existed outside the Anglo-American political institutions from which the federal constitutional debate emerged, making simplistic nationwide percentages particularly misleading.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and the other major Asian religious traditions had little to no organized institutional presence within the eighteenth-century United States. We do not have evidence of Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, Sikh gurdwaras, or established congregations representing those traditions in the thirteen colonies during the Founding era. Individual sailors, servants, merchants, travelers, or immigrants from Asia may occasionally have passed through colonial ports, but that is very different from demonstrating an enduring religious community.

The stronger conclusion is that **the organized religious environment surrounding the Anglo-American political institutions of the Founding was overwhelmingly Christian**, while Judaism represented only a tiny fraction of the population, Islam survived particularly among portions of the enslaved African population, Indigenous religions remained substantial within Native communities, and the major Asian traditions had little organized presence within the political and educational institutions from which the federal Founding emerged.

The Library of Congress's extensive survey of eighteenth-century American religion documents the rapid growth of Anglican, Congregationalist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed, and other Christian churches, while separately identifying established Jewish communities and synagogues; it does not identify comparable Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh institutions in the colonies. (Library of Congress, Religion in Eighteenth-Century America; Library of Congress, America as a Religious Refuge — Jews Find a Refuge in America.)

That distinction matters when interpreting the Founders' language. Today, when Americans hear the word *religion*, we immediately imagine an explicitly pluralistic landscape containing Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, many other traditions, and a large religiously unaffiliated population. In Washington's political world, the immediate institutional context surrounding the word was overwhelmingly Christian. Again, the Founders favored a Christian foundation for morality and civility but not a particular denomination spearheading the Federal government.

That does **not** mean every time Washington or another Founder wrote *religion* the word was literally synonymous with *Christianity*. It does mean, however, that when Washington, Adams, Rush, and their contemporaries discussed religion's role in morality or education, they were speaking inside a society where Christianity supplied most of the organized churches, sermons, religious schooling, biblical vocabulary, and moral instruction surrounding their political culture.

**Modern historian Dr. Thomas S. Kidd,** whose scholarship has concentrated extensively on religion and the American Revolution, provides a useful confirmation of this larger historical picture. Kidd observes that "Protestant Christianity has undoubtedly been the greatest shaping influence in the broad story of American religious history." Speaking specifically about the colonial period, he has also noted how numerically unusual religious alternatives were, explaining in a discussion of interfaith marriage that "there were so few non-Christians that they were extremely unlikely in any case." Kidd's historical assessment supports the distinction we have been making throughout this section: the religious world surrounding the political, educational, and civic institutions from which the American Founding emerged was overwhelmingly Christian and, more particularly, overwhelmingly Protestant, even while the revolutionary generation increasingly developed principles of religious liberty broad enough to protect people outside that Christian majority. **(**Thomas S. Kidd, *America's Religious History: An Interview with Thomas S. Kidd* — Bible Gateway; Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* — Smithsonian Libraries.)

That historical context is essential.

# The Constitution Was the Hardware; Character Was the Human Operating System

Another way to understand Washington's and the other Founders' concern is to imagine America's constitutional institutions as the **hardware** of the Republic. The Constitution establishes separated powers, elections, representation, courts, federalism, legislative procedures, executive authority, and mechanisms for amendment. It is an extraordinary architecture for distributing political power and restraining its abuse.

But even brilliant constitutional hardware cannot determine the character of the people operating it. A legislator may possess perfectly constitutional authority and behave dishonestly. A judge may understand law while exercising power unjustly, a business owner may possess economic liberty while practicing fraud, and a voter may enjoy political freedom without exercising it responsibly.

The constitutional system cannot reach inside the human being and install honesty. Washington's Farewell Address therefore confronted the **human operating system** beneath the constitutional structure. If political institutions are administered by people—and if those people carry greed, generosity, ambition, resentment, appetite, courage, selfishness, loyalty, love, and fear into everything they control—what teaches them to govern those passions rather than surrender to them?

Washington answered with religion and morality. Adams spoke of religion, morality, virtue, and the limitations of intellectual cultivation alone. Rush went further and warned that learning separated from religion could actually produce moral mischief.

Different voices were examining substantially the same vulnerability: limited government depends in significant measure upon human beings possessing enough internal government not to require unlimited external government.

## Rights and Duties Belonged to the Same Moral Architecture

Modern Americans understandably speak constantly about rights. The Declaration of Independence itself placed unalienable rights near the center of America's political vocabulary. Washington's Farewell Address, however, repeatedly employed another concept that deserves equal attention: **duties**.

Religion and morality, Washington wrote, were among the strongest supports of the “duties of Men & citizens.” His phrase reveals a civic worldview in which liberty meant more than asking what a person was legally permitted to do. It also required asking what that individual owed other human beings while exercising freedom. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Founders Online.)

Modern culture is remarkably fluent in the language of personal autonomy. The older republican vocabulary was equally insistent upon the relationship between liberty and obligation. Freedom of speech does not make deliberate deception virtuous, property rights do not transform fraud into integrity, political liberty does not excuse dishonesty, and possessing rights does not erase responsibilities toward families, neighbors, communities, or future generations.

The older American classroom therefore attempted to educate both halves of citizenship. Rights mattered because human beings possessed dignity, while duties mattered because free human beings remained morally responsible for what they did with their liberty. That relationship

between liberty and obligation leads directly into the biblical moral world that surrounded much of early American education.

## This Is Where the Bible Entered the Moral Vocabulary

For generations immersed in Scripture, Washington's argument would not have sounded alien even though the *Farewell Address* was a civic document rather than a sermon. The Bible was not merely a devotional book in eighteenth-century America; it was also a major source of language, moral categories, imagery, and assumptions about human nature. George Washington's own surviving papers repeatedly employ biblical expressions and imagery, and Mount Vernon's scholarship has documented how extensively Scripture shaped the language of his writings.

Washington himself referred to what he called the **"pure and benign light of Revelation"** as one of the forces that had improved mankind and increased "the blessings of Society." In his 1783 Circular Letter to the states, written as the Revolutionary War was ending, he placed that revelation alongside expanding knowledge, political experience, commerce, and intellectual freedom as part of the extraordinary historical setting in which the American republic was emerging. The important point is that Washington did not speak of revelation as socially irrelevant; he included it among the influences he believed had exerted a beneficial effect upon human society. (George Washington, Circular Letter to the States, June 8, 1783 — Founders Online.) (Rotunda)

Washington even closed that Circular Letter with unmistakably Christian moral language. He urged Americans toward justice, mercy, charity, humility, and the virtues represented by what he called the **"Divine Author of our blessed Religion," which was Christianity.** The point was not merely private generic devotion. Washington was connecting moral character with his hopes

for whether the new United States would become a free, prosperous, and "happy Nation." (Rotunda)

The Old Testament itself repeatedly connects the moral character of a people with the condition of their society. **Proverbs 14:34** declares that righteousness exalts a nation while sin brings disgrace to a people. **Judges 21:25** depicts the moral disorder of its period through the memorable description of people doing what was right in their own eyes. Neither passage transforms the United States into ancient Israel, but both express a biblical principle that individual moral choices eventually acquire social consequences.

That distinction is important. The Founders were not creating a new covenant Israel or transferring Old Testament civil law wholesale into the Constitution. Yet generations who knew these biblical texts intimately had inherited a moral worldview in which the character of individuals and the condition of societies were inseparable. Personal righteousness, justice, restraint, honesty, mercy, and responsibility were not merely private virtues; their presence or absence eventually affected families, communities, institutions, and nations.

**John Adams** spoke even more directly about the Bible itself. Writing to François Adriaan van der Kemp in 1813, Adams declared simply, **"The Bible is the best Book in the World."** That statement came late in Adams's life and represented his personal judgment rather than an official governmental policy, but it demonstrates how highly one of the central figures of the American Founding continued to regard Scripture. (John Adams, Letter to François Adriaan van der Kemp, December 26, 1813 — Founders Online.) (Founders Online)

Adams had made an even more explicitly political connection six years earlier in correspondence with Benjamin Rush. He wrote that the Bible contained **"the most profound Philosophy, the most perfect Morality, and the most refined Policy"** he knew and then called it **"the most Republican Book in the World."** Adams immediately connected that judgment with national morality and the preservation of republican government. Whatever complexities existed in Adams's personal theology, there is little ambiguity in this particular letter about the civic importance he attributed to biblical morality. (John Adams, Letter to Benjamin Rush, February 2, 1807 — Founders Online.) (Founders Online)

**Benjamin Rush** was more explicit still. In his 1791 essay **"A Defence of the Use of the Bible as a School Book,"** Rush argued that Scripture should play a direct role in education because of the moral habits he believed it cultivated. Among his opening propositions were that Christianity provided true moral instruction, that biblical reading was the best means of learning it, and that Scripture contained knowledge particularly necessary to human life. The Kansas Historical Society preserves the work in the Benjamin and Richard Rush papers. (Kansas Historical Society, Benjamin and Richard Rush Papers — "A Defence of the Use of the Bible as a School Book," March 10, 1791.) (Kansas Historical Society)

Rush's argument belongs naturally in this investigation because he was asking precisely the educational question we have been tracing: **What kind of knowledge forms the kind of people a republic requires?** He did not regard education as simply the accumulation of intellectual information. He believed moral formation had to begin early and that Scripture supplied both

principles and motivations capable of shaping conduct, conscience, self-restraint, and public responsibility.

Rush's reasoning therefore fits closely with the larger distinction between **knowledge and character**. He was not claiming that the mechanical act of reading automatically produced virtue. His argument was that what children read, what moral universe they inhabit, what duties they are taught, and what authority they understand to stand behind those duties all contribute to the formation of character. For Rush, the Bible belonged in that educational process because he believed it trained both the conscience and the citizen.

The New Testament adds another dimension to that moral vocabulary by recognizing legitimate civil authority while denying that government possesses ultimate authority. In **Matthew 22:21**, **Jesus** commands His hearers to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Caesar receives something, but Caesar does not receive everything.

**Paul the Apostle (c. AD 5–c. 64/67), author of numerous New Testament epistles**, develops another aspect of civil authority in **Romans 13:1–7**, where government possesses legitimate authority under God rather than replacing God. Christianity therefore contains resources both for respecting lawful civil authority and for denying that political authority is morally absolute.

This helps explain why a culture deeply influenced by Christianity could think simultaneously about **outward law and inward conscience**. Government had legitimate work to perform, but no civil institution could fully replace the moral government of the individual soul. Law might restrain theft, violence, fraud, or disorder, but law alone could not produce honesty, self-control, mercy, fidelity, humility, or love of neighbor.

The historical point is therefore not that every Founder interpreted the Bible identically, that every Founder was an orthodox Christian, or that the Constitution transformed biblical law into federal law. They did not, and it did not. The stronger and more historically defensible conclusion is that **the Bible supplied a major portion of the moral vocabulary through which many Founding-era Americans discussed character, duty, justice, conscience, liberty, virtue, and republican self-government**.

Washington could speak of the **"pure and benign light of Revelation"** as an influence that had increased the blessings of society. Adams could call the Bible **"the best Book in the World"** and **"the most Republican Book in the World."** Rush went further and argued explicitly for educating young Americans through Scripture because of the civic and moral virtues he believed it cultivated. Those differences in emphasis matter, but together they help explain why Washington's later warnings about religion, morality, virtue, education, and national character would have sounded entirely natural within the moral world of the Founding generation. (Rotunda)

## Can Nonreligious People Be Moral?

A serious investigation must address an obvious objection. If Washington believed national morality depended upon religion, does that mean atheists, agnostics, or secular people are incapable of behaving morally?

Clearly not. Nonreligious people can demonstrate honesty, courage, compassion, fidelity, sacrifice, civic responsibility, and extraordinary concern for others. Washington's argument does not require us to deny observable reality, and his own wording conceded that refined education could exert significant influence upon particular minds. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Founders Online.)

His argument concerned something larger than the moral behavior of particular unbelievers. It concerned **national morality and civility across generations** and the question of what ultimately supplies moral principles with authority when obeying them becomes costly.

Christian theism answers that question by grounding human dignity in humanity's creation in the image of God, described in **Genesis 1:26–27 — NASB**, and grounding moral obligation ultimately in God's character, authority and His moral absolutes. Secular ethical traditions offer other accounts through rational duty, human flourishing, empathy, natural rights, social contract, evolutionary cooperation, and other philosophical theories.  Even as unbelievers, no matter how marred by sin, they can still reflect some of the image of God in which they are made.

Nevertheless, those arguments continue today, and thoughtful people reach different conclusions. Historically, however, Washington had stated his own judgment plainly: reason and experience did not justify confidence that national morality could prevail after religious principle had been

excluded from its foundations. (George Washington, Farewell Address — Religion and National Morality.)

## America Is Now Conducting an Experiment Washington Could Never Have Imagined

Washington died in 1799. He never saw industrial civilization, automobiles, radio, television, nuclear weapons, mass higher education, modern medicine, smartphones, social media, artificial intelligence, contemporary neuroscience, or an America in which nearly three adults in ten identify with no religion.

Pew's 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study found that **62 percent of U.S. adults identify as Christian**, while **29 percent identify as religiously unaffiliated**—atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular." The study also reports that 1.7 percent identify religiously as Jewish, 1.2 percent as Muslim, 1.1 percent as Buddhist, and 0.9 percent as Hindu. (Pew Research Center, 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study: Christianity, Other Religions, and the Unaffiliated.)

Modern America therefore presents conditions Washington and his contemporaries could scarcely have imagined. We possess levels of literacy, scientific knowledge, advanced education, technological power, professional specialization, and instantaneous access to information far beyond anything available to an eighteenth-century statesman.

What makes the experiment especially significant is that modern civilization has multiplied human power far faster than it has eliminated the ancient moral problems Washington, Adams, and Rush worried about. Education can sharpen intelligence, technology can magnify reach,

medicine can extend life, and artificial intelligence can accelerate decision-making, but none of those achievements automatically settles questions of honesty, justice, restraint, sacrifice, duty, or the proper use of power. In fact, the greater our capabilities become, the more consequential those moral questions become, because a dishonest or unrestrained person equipped with twenty-first-century knowledge can affect vastly more people than an equally flawed person could in Washington's world. The experiment, therefore, is not whether education and technology are good—they plainly can be—but whether growing human capability can safely outrun the formation of the character governing it.

That is what makes Washington's warning more than an eighteenth-century curiosity. The challenge is not whether a modern society can produce brilliant specialists, powerful institutions, and extraordinary technology; clearly it can. The deeper question is whether those advances are accompanied by enough moral formation to govern ambition, appetite, resentment, and self-interest when no external rule can reach every decision. Washington's concern was that national life eventually depends upon the character of the people exercising its freedoms, and no amount of technical sophistication can make that question disappear.

That interpretation is strongly reinforced by **Dr. Gordon S. Wood (1933–2026), Pulitzer Prize–winning historian of the American Revolution and Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University.** Explaining why the Founding generation placed such extraordinary emphasis upon virtue, Wood observed that republican government "depends on people who are virtuous," by which he meant citizens willing to restrain private interest for the public good. He continued that the success of such a political system "depended on the caliber or the character of the people in the society," and then deliberately carried the Founders' concern into the present: "It remains a question for us even today. Do we have the caliber of character to sustain this government that's based on consent?" Wood's point is especially relevant here because it identifies the same structural problem beneath Washington's *Farewell Address*. Republican government transfers enormous responsibility from rulers to citizens; consequently, increasing the citizens' knowledge or technological power does not eliminate the need for character—it can actually increase the consequences when character fails. (Gordon S. Wood, "Why Did the Founders Think That Virtue Was So Important to the Success of a Republic?" — National Constitution Center/Khan Academy; Oxford University Press, Gordon S. Wood, *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution*.)

If intellectual advancement by itself automatically produced moral advancement, our society should provide an unusually favorable test. Yet Washington's underlying question has not disappeared. An engineer can understand exactly how a technology functions while using it dishonestly. A lawyer can possess extraordinary education while deceiving a client, a scientist can command enormous technical knowledge while violating scientific integrity, and a business executive can understand sophisticated financial systems while committing fraud.

Knowledge increases what human beings are capable of doing, but it does not automatically determine how human beings ought to use those enlarged capabilities. That distinction is precisely why Washington's phrase **"refined education"** and Rush's warning that learning without religion could produce "real mischief" sound surprisingly contemporary 230 years later.

# Washington’s Warning Looks Prophetic!

From a Christian historical perspective, this is where Washington's *Farewell Address* can begin to appear **prophetic**.

That word requires qualification. Washington was not a biblical prophet receiving new revelation from God, and his *Farewell Address* should never be elevated to the authority of Scripture. I am using *prophetic* here in its broader sense: a statesman perceiving a moral trajectory beneath contemporary events, identifying the principle involved, and warning generations not yet born about where that trajectory might eventually lead.

The portion of the *Farewell Address* that most naturally gives rise to that description is Washington’s extended warning about whether Americans could preserve morality, civility, and the character required for freedom while increasingly separating those qualities from religious principle. He did not merely praise religion as socially useful. He warned that deliberately undermining religion and morality meant weakening what he regarded as the very “supports” and “props” of political prosperity, civic duty, and public happiness. **It is especially striking because he did not merely praise religion in general terms; he warned future generations against assuming that education by itself could replace religiously grounded morality.** His language deserves to be heard at length because the force of the argument is greater than any modern paraphrase can capture:

> *Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert [undermine or weaken] these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props [supports] of the duties of Men & citizens. The*

> *mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect & to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private & public felicity [happiness and well-being].”*
>
> *Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.*
>
> *Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure [unusual disposition or type of mind]—reason & experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail [continue successfully] in exclusion of religious principle*
>
> *’Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference [lack of concern] upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric [the political and social structure]?* **(George Washington, *Farewell Address*, September 19, 1796 — Founders Online.)**

This is the passage that gives Washington’s warning its prophetic quality. He was looking beyond the political controversies of 1796 and identifying what he believed was a deeper vulnerability in the American experiment. A republic could expand education, improve institutions, strengthen courts, and enlarge human knowledge, yet Washington warned that those achievements would not automatically preserve national morality if the underlying sources of conscience, duty, and virtue were weakened. His concern was not simply that individuals might become less religious; it was that the moral infrastructure supporting truthfulness, trust, self-restraint, justice, and responsible liberty might gradually erode beneath institutions that still appeared outwardly strong.

Remarkably, Washington himself then used the language of an **experiment**. Immediately after describing virtue or morality as a necessary spring of popular government, he asked whether Providence had connected the permanent happiness of a nation with its virtue. His actual question makes the forward-looking character of the warning even clearer:

> *Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity [happiness and well-being] of a Nation with its virtue? The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles [elevates or gives dignity to] human Nature. Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices?*
> ***(George Washington, Farewell Address — Providence, Virtue, and the Experiment.)***

That final question—**“Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices?”**—may be among the most sobering sentences in the entire address. Washington was not claiming to know precisely how future generations would behave. He was asking whether the American experiment in liberty

might eventually be undermined not primarily by defective constitutional machinery, but by the accumulated moral failures of the people operating it.

In simple terms, Washington was saying that America's republican system was an experiment in whether a free people could remain free by governing themselves morally from within rather than being increasingly controlled from without. He believed virtue was not merely a private religious preference but part of the practical foundation of national well-being. If citizens possessed enough honesty, restraint, duty, and moral accountability, liberty could endure with limited government; if those qualities weakened, the constitutional structure itself would face greater strain. His "experiment," then, was ultimately a test of whether freedom could survive without the character required to sustain it.

Washington's warnings elsewhere in the *Farewell Address* reinforce that forward-looking quality. When discussing political faction, he traced party conflict to **"the strongest passions of the human Mind"** and warned that faction could inflame animosity, generate false alarms, weaken public administration, and eventually incline citizens toward stronger concentrations of power. He also cautioned that foreign powers could exploit domestic divisions and manipulate public opinion. Those warnings were separate from his religion-and-morality argument, but they reveal the same method: Washington was repeatedly looking beneath institutions to the recurring passions of human beings and asking what those passions might eventually do to a free republic. (George Washington, *Farewell Address*, September 19, 1796 — Founders Online.)

Two hundred and thirty years later, America can examine a side of that experiment Washington never witnessed. Can a society preserve the moral fruits he prized while loosening their connection with the religious soil from which he believed they grew? Can vastly expanded education substitute for transcendent moral accountability, and can constitutional structures indefinitely compensate for weakened internal self-government?

And what do we actually see as America moves further into that experiment? The evidence does **not** allow us simply to declare that declining religion alone caused declining civility or morality; social change has many causes. Yet the parallel trends are striking enough to examine seriously. Pew reports that the proportion of U.S. adults identifying as Christian declined from **78 percent in 2007 to 62 percent in 2023–24**, while the religiously unaffiliated rose from **16 percent to 29 percent**. At the same time, the share of Americans saying **"most people can be trusted"** stands at only **34 percent**, compared with **46 percent in 1972**. Nearly half of Americans—**47 percent**—say people behave more rudely in public than they did before the COVID-19 pandemic, and **34 percent** say they encounter rude behavior often or almost always. In political life, **84 percent** told Pew that debate had become less respectful and **78 percent** said it had become less fact-based. Gallup's May 2026 survey adds another remarkable measure of Americans' own assessment: a record **56 percent** rated the state of moral values in the United States as "poor," while **80 percent** said moral values were "getting worse." Those statistics do not prove Washington's religious proposition, but they unquestionably give us modern evidence relevant to the experiment he asked future generations to consider.

Contemporary sociologist **Dr. James Davison Hunter (1955– ),** LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and author of ***The Death of Character***, has reached a strikingly similar conclusion from modern social science. Hunter argues that character is not produced by information alone but is formed within institutions and communities that repeatedly teach and embody a moral vision. As he put it, "a thriving character, a thriving moral life… depends upon a thriving community that surrounds them." That observation sounds remarkably close to the problem Washington identified: education may enlarge the mind, but families, churches, schools, friendships, and communities help form the moral habits by which knowledge is ultimately used. (University of Virginia, James Davison Hunter — Department of Sociology; Ethics & Public Policy Center, James Davison Hunter on Character, Community, and Moral Formation.)

From a Christian perspective, this also bears an arresting resemblance to **2 Timothy 3:1–5**. Paul's description of the "last days" focuses not primarily upon technological catastrophe but upon deterioration of human character:

> ***But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.***

For the Christian reader, Washington's civic warning and Paul's theological warning are obviously not equivalent in authority. Yet they intersect at a remarkable point: **neither assumes that greater knowledge, increased sophistication, or technological advancement will automatically produce greater virtue**. Both ultimately direct attention back to the moral condition of the human being exercising freedom and power.

Washington could not have anticipated the technologies through which those questions would eventually be tested. He did, however, understand something enduring about the people who would use them. Human beings carry pride, fear, ambition, generosity, resentment, courage, selfishness, love, appetite, and moral conviction into every institution they operate.

That is the sense in which Washington's warning can reasonably be described as prophetic without turning him into a prophet in the biblical sense. He did not foresee smartphones, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, social media, or twenty-first-century America. What he foresaw was the persistence of human nature. Greater knowledge, more sophisticated institutions, and extraordinary technological power would not abolish ambition, faction, dishonesty, appetite, resentment, or the need for moral restraint. In fact, as human power increases, the consequences of character—good or bad—can become even greater.

His deepest concern was therefore never merely whether the Constitution had been brilliantly designed. It was whether the people living beneath that Constitution would continue to possess the character necessary to make constitutional liberty work. **That is why Washington's warning reaches beyond 1796. The political machinery would change, the technologies would change, the population would change, and the religious landscape would change—**

**but the experiment would remain lodged in the same place: the character of the human beings entrusted with freedom.**

# Modern America Is Taking Up Washington's Experiment

A stronger investigation examines Washington's narrower proposition. Can a society maintain widespread honesty, trust, civic responsibility, self-restraint, respect for human dignity, and the habits of self-government while religion becomes less formative and intellectual education is increasingly expected to carry the moral burden independently?

That question can be investigated historically, sociologically, philosophically, and theologically. Washington did not leave us a statistical formula, but he did leave a proposition against which later experience can be compared.

Nearly four decades later, **Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859),** French political thinker and author of ***Democracy in America***, reached a remarkably similar conclusion after studying the young United States firsthand. Tocqueville asked, "How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened?" His concern closely parallels Washington's: the more freedom citizens possess from external political control, the more important internal moral restraints become. Political scientist Barbara Allen, whose scholarly work examines Tocqueville's theory of democracy, argues that he saw self-government as resting upon a deeper foundation of "mores, institutions and consciousness," with religion playing an important role in sustaining that foundation. Washington and Tocqueville were writing in different generations, but both were probing the same enduring problem—whether democratic liberty can remain stable when the moral habits required for self-government weaken. **(Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, discussion summarized in** National Endowment for

Democracy, "Democracy on Trial: Religion, Civil Society, and Democratic Theory"; Barbara Allen, "Tocqueville's Analysis of Belief in a Transcendent Order, Enlightened Interest and Democracy," *History of the Human Sciences*.)

Modern society places considerable confidence in institutional solutions. Professional ethical codes can regulate conduct, statutes can punish misconduct, civics education can teach constitutional procedures, psychology can illuminate human behavior, and administrative safeguards can restrain certain abuses. Each can accomplish genuine good.

Washington's generation nevertheless tended to begin one step earlier. Institutions mattered, but institutions were operated by people. Education mattered, but educated people still possessed passions requiring restraint. Law mattered, but law functioned best when millions of citizens possessed moral reasons to obey it even when no enforcement officer was present.

A surprisingly modern confirmation of that older insight comes from **Dr. Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012), Nobel Prize–winning political economist and longtime professor at Indiana University,** whose career was devoted to studying how ordinary people actually govern themselves. After decades of field and experimental research, Ostrom found that successful self-governing communities depend not merely upon formal rules or external enforcement but upon trust, reciprocity, reputation, shared expectations, and norms of cooperation. In her Nobel lecture she emphasized that "building trust in one another" was of "central importance" in solving social dilemmas, while her broader research showed that people often cooperate successfully when they develop internalized expectations that others will also act responsibly. Ostrom was not making Washington's religious argument, and her research does not prove that religion is the only source of those norms. But it supplies a striking modern institutional counterpart to his reasoning: free systems work better when citizens possess habits of trustworthiness and reciprocity before coercive authority has to intervene. When those habits weaken, societies must rely more heavily upon monitoring, sanctions, regulation, and enforcement—the very movement from internal self-government toward external control that Washington's argument anticipated**.** (Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize Lecture — "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems"; Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize Interview Transcript.)

The contrast is subtle but profound. Modern approaches frequently ask how institutions can better regulate human conduct. Washington asked whether republican institutions could remain limited and free if the people operating them progressively lost the habit of regulating themselves.

Rush's warning makes the problem sharper still. If education enlarges human capacity without necessarily improving human character, then education cannot be treated as an automatic moral cure. The more powerful human knowledge becomes, the more consequential the character of the knowledgeable person becomes with it.

# Washington’s Religious Liberty Makes the Experiment More Interesting

One reason Washington's argument remains historically fascinating is that he did not attempt to solve this moral problem through compulsory religious belief. The president who called religion and morality indispensable also defended religious liberty with unusual clarity.

In his 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, Rhode Island, Washington rejected the older idea that religious minorities merely enjoyed “toleration” at the pleasure of a majority. Instead, he grounded liberty of conscience in equal citizenship and inherent rights. **“All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship,” Washington wrote. He continued that religious freedom was no longer to be spoken of as though “by the indulgence of one class of people” another class merely enjoyed its natural rights, adding that the federal government gave “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”** (George Washington, Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August 18, 1790 — Founders Online.)

A separate private letter from six years earlier shows just how matter-of-fact Washington could be about religious diversity in ordinary life. Writing to his former aide Tench Tilghman while seeking skilled workmen for Mount Vernon, Washington said he did not care whether suitable workers came from Asia, Africa, or Europe and added that **“They may be Mahometans, Jews, or Christian of any Sect—or they may be Athiests.”** His concern in that context was whether they were good workmen and people of good character, not whether they belonged to his own religious tradition. (George Washington, Letter to Tench Tilghman, March 24, 1784 — Founders Online.)

Washington therefore knew religious difference was real and expected it to exist within American society. At the same time, he later argued in the Farewell Address that religion and morality were indispensable supports of political prosperity. Those positions were not contradictory in his mind because he did not equate **religious influence** with **religious coercion**.

Washington therefore did not present Americans with a simple choice between compulsory religion and a religion-free public square. His record points toward something more complicated: a government constrained against religious persecution operating within a society where religious conviction could remain morally formative.

That distinction matters enormously for our classroom investigation. If Washington did not expect government itself to manufacture religious faith through coercion, much of the formative work necessarily occurred elsewhere—in families, churches, schools, communities, voluntary associations, and the conscience of the individual.

# What Washington Was Asking the Classroom to Produce

We can now return to the educational question with which this investigation began. If education exists merely to make students employable, moral formation can be assigned somewhere else. If its responsibility ends with technical competence, a school can declare success when graduates can calculate, code, read, analyze evidence, pass examinations, and enter the workforce.

But a republic asks more of its citizens than an employer asks of employees. Today's students will eventually vote, serve on juries, enforce laws, teach children, manage corporations, command military units, develop artificial intelligence, practice medicine, control financial

institutions, raise families, write legislation, judge criminal cases, report news, conduct scientific research, and perhaps occupy positions of enormous public authority.

The more powerful their knowledge becomes, the more consequential their character becomes with it. A brilliantly educated person possessing enormous technological, financial, political, or scientific power but little moral restraint can inflict far greater damage than someone possessing neither the knowledge nor the influence.

That is why the educational question **“What do students know?”** can never completely replace the older question **“What kind of people are we forming?”** Washington's generation did not believe a republic could afford to forget the second question, and Rush's warning shows how strongly at least some Founders believed the two questions were connected.

## Knowledge Without Character Was Never the Entire Educational Vision

When these documents are read together, the older educational philosophy becomes surprisingly coherent. Washington promoted knowledge while warning that refined education alone could not safely be expected to sustain national morality. John Adams saw Christianity carrying duties, rights, justice, restraint, and moral accountability across social classes from childhood onward. Benjamin Rush was so concerned about separating intellectual development from religious formation that he warned learning itself could produce “real mischief” when morally ungoverned.

Even the brief glimpse we have allowed ourselves of the Northwest Ordinance shows religion, morality, knowledge, schools, government, and human happiness occupying the same conceptual world. We will investigate that connection fully later in this series rather than exhausting it here.

The larger point is already visible. The Founding-era classroom was expected to do more than transfer information or prepare a workforce. It participated in forming human beings capable of exercising freedom without transforming freedom into license.

That is why the old word **virtue** belongs back inside our historical vocabulary. It was a bridge between knowledge and character, liberty and responsibility, rights and duties. The Founders' educational problem was not simply how to make people more intelligent; it was how to form people who possessed both the intelligence to govern themselves and the character to use freedom responsibly.

# The Founder’s Final Classroom

Picture the scene again in September 1796. Washington has spent much of his adult life carrying the burdens of war and government. He is preparing voluntarily to relinquish the presidency and return to Mount Vernon, but before leaving public life he sends the American people a written lesson about forces that might preserve or eventually endanger the experiment he helped create.

He warns about political faction, sectional hostility, reckless foreign attachments, public debt, and disregard for constitutional government. Yet amid all that statecraft, Washington turns toward something no legislature can manufacture through statute: **the moral character of the people themselves**.

That is why the religion section belongs at the center of ***America's Forgotten Classroom.*** Washington was not merely telling presidents how to administer government. He was asking what kind of human beings must inhabit a republic if republican institutions are going to remain free.

The constitutional system can restrain power from outside the individual, but it cannot completely govern the individual from within. Courts can punish perjury but cannot manufacture love of truth. Laws can prosecute theft but cannot create honesty. Government can punish violence but cannot produce love of neighbor, while schools can impart enormous knowledge without guaranteeing wisdom.

For Washington, the architecture of freedom therefore extended beneath the written Constitution into the character of the citizen. His use of **virtue** was not quaint eighteenth-century sentimentality; it described the self-restraint, justice, courage, duty, and moral responsibility that allowed extensive political liberty to exist without requiring government to police every human impulse.

# Will Modern Americans Listen to Washington Again?

On **September 19, 2026**, exactly 230 years after Washington's Farewell Address appeared in Philadelphia, the United States occupies a position the first president could never have witnessed. We inherited his Republic while transforming almost every social circumstance surrounding it. Our population is vastly larger and more religiously diverse, education reaches enormous portions of society, scientific knowledge has expanded beyond comparison, and technologies now magnify individual power in ways no eighteenth-century statesman could have imagined.

That transformation gives our generation an unusual historical opportunity because we are no longer merely reading Washington's proposition. We are living within conditions that allow important parts of it to be tested.

Washington believed religion and morality supported political prosperity, religious obligation reinforced the trust upon which courts depended, virtue was a necessary spring of popular government, and refined education should not be expected to sustain national morality in exclusion of religious principle. Adams, Hamilton, Rush, and other Founding-era documents reveal important variations of the same underlying concern.

The question today is therefore larger than whether modern Americans personally admire George Washington. Historical investigation does not require anyone to agree with him simply because he was the nation's first president, and American religious liberty leaves citizens free to reject his premises.

The more consequential question is whether subsequent experience supplies evidence relevant to his reasoning. Can an increasingly educated society maintain the character required for freedom without transcendent moral accountability? Can a culture preserve a powerful language of individual rights while weakening its language of duties? Can institutions retain trust when truth becomes negotiable whenever deception becomes sufficiently advantageous, and can civil law permanently compensate for self-restraints that families, churches, schools, communities, and individuals cease to cultivate as strongly?

Washington himself understood that education and virtue had to work together rather than compete with one another. Just eighteen days before the Farewell Address appeared, he wrote Alexander Hamilton that education was “one of the surest means of enlightening & giving just ways of thinking to our Citizens,” and he even wanted the address to include a recommendation for a national university. His concern was therefore never that Americans might become too educated. It was that knowledge, political liberty, and public institutions would remain secure only when the citizens directing them possessed the habits of judgment and character necessary to use those freedoms responsibly. (George Washington, Letter to Alexander Hamilton, September 1, 1796 — Founders Online.)

There are signs that many Americans themselves are looking backward as they consider the country's future. In a **2026 Cato Institute/Morning Consult national survey** conducted for America's 250th anniversary, 70 percent of Americans said the nation's Founding principles remain relevant today, while 57 percent believed the country had moved away from them. An independent **NPR/PBS News/Marist survey** produced an even more striking result: 47 percent said America had moved “far away” from its Founding principles and another 36 percent said it had moved “somewhat away”—83 percent combined. Those findings do not tell us that Americans agree about what every Founding principle means, much less that they would embrace every belief held by Washington's generation. But they do suggest something important for this investigation: 230 years after the *Farewell Address*, Americans across a deeply changed society are still measuring the nation against principles associated with its Founding—and substantial majorities believe some distance has opened between the two. (Cato

Institute, America at 250 Survey: Founding Principles Remain Relevant to Most Americans; NPR/PBS News/Marist Poll, America 250 — July 2026.)

Washington's generation believed those questions were interconnected. Much modern thinking is more willing to separate them, which makes the contrast worth investigating rather than reducing to slogans.

## Will Modern Americans Rediscover the Message in the Bottle?

From a Christian historical perspective, Washington's final warning now reads almost like a message placed into a bottle and sent downstream to a civilization he knew he would never see. He could not foresee smartphones, artificial intelligence, global telecommunications, genetic engineering, nuclear technology, modern universities, contemporary psychology, or America's present religious demographics.

Yet he recognized that political institutions ultimately rest upon human beings, and human beings do not stop bringing pride, greed, compassion, resentment, courage, self-interest, generosity, appetite, love, and moral conviction into the institutions they control.

That is what gives Washington's warning its almost prophetic quality. He did not possess supernatural knowledge of our future; rather, he identified an enduring moral problem beneath political history: **How much external government becomes necessary when internal self-government weakens?**

The question becomes even more arresting when placed beside modern educational achievement. We possess incomparably more information than Washington's generation and enormously greater technical power, but technical advancement has not abolished the ancient distinction between knowledge and wisdom.

Science can tell us how to manipulate the genome without by itself resolving every moral question about when such manipulation is justified. Artificial intelligence can enormously expand human capability without supplying an ethical principle governing every use of that capability. Financial knowledge can create wealth or facilitate sophisticated fraud, while mastery of persuasive communication can defend truth or spread deception with unprecedented speed.

This is where Benjamin Rush's warning becomes especially haunting. Without religion, he believed, learning could do "real mischief" to the morals and principles of mankind. Rush could never have imagined computers, nuclear physics, genetic engineering, or machine intelligence, but he understood the underlying problem: increasing knowledge increases human power, while the moral character directing that power remains a separate question. (Benjamin Rush, Letter to John Armstrong, March 19, 1783 — The Founders' Constitution.)

Again, as the late historian Dr. Gordon S. Wood, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian of the American Revolution and Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, asked: "It remains a question for us even today. Do we have the caliber of character to sustain this government that's based on consent?" That is remarkably close to the "message in the bottle" Washington left behind. The technologies surrounding the citizen may change beyond recognition, but the constitutional problem remains stubbornly human: a government resting upon consent still depends upon the judgment, restraint, honesty, and character of the people exercising that consent. (Gordon S. Wood, Why Did the Founders Think That Virtue Was So Important to the Success of a Republic? — National Constitution Center/Khan Academy.)

Modern sociologist and political scientist Robert D. Putnam, Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy Emeritus at Harvard University and author of ***Bowling Alone***, has spent decades studying the social trust and civic relationships upon which communities depend. Putnam describes "social capital" as the value created by social networks and by the "norms of reciprocity" that lead people to act for one another rather than simply for themselves. His research has repeatedly emphasized that churches and other voluntary associations historically served as major generators of those habits; indeed, he has written that "faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America." Putnam is not making Washington's theological argument, nor is he claiming that only religious people can possess civic virtue. But his findings strongly reinforce the social mechanism Washington was worried about: free institutions depend upon trust, reciprocity, responsibility, and habits of cooperation that government cannot simply command into existence. If those formative communities weaken, the problem is not merely religious decline—it is the possible erosion of some of the very social resources upon which self-government depends. (Robert D. Putnam, Social Capital Primer; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Religious Organizations and Social Capital — International Center for Not-for-Profit Law.)

Washington's concern was therefore not anti-intellectual, and Rush's was not anti-educational. Both men valued learning enormously. Their warning was against confusing **intellectual advancement with moral advancement**, a distinction that may be even more consequential in our century than it was in theirs.

## The Experiment Is Now Ours

A responsible historical investigation should not announce the result before examining the evidence. Washington himself appealed to **"reason & experience,"** and that ought to govern our inquiry as well.

If modern America demonstrates increasing honesty, social trust, family stability, civic responsibility, self-restraint, respect for human dignity, and an expanding ability to disagree while respecting the rights of others, that evidence deserves serious consideration. If significant indicators move in another direction, those developments deserve equally serious examination. The point is not to begin with a verdict and then search selectively for evidence; it is to take Washington's proposition seriously enough to test it.

The extraordinary development is that Washington's question is no longer hypothetical. America possesses more than two centuries of subsequent history through which parts of his proposition can be examined, including a dramatic expansion of education and scientific knowledge alongside profound changes in the country's religious composition.

We are therefore testing whether extraordinary knowledge can substitute for moral formation. We are testing whether constitutional liberty can remain healthy as some of the religious assumptions Washington believed supported it become less culturally dominant, and whether

moral concepts inherited from an older worldview can remain compelling after later generations become increasingly detached from the foundations upon which earlier Americans grounded them.

One modern scholar whose work speaks directly to that distinction is James Davison Hunter, Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia. In ***The Death of Character***, Hunter argues that character is not produced simply by giving young people more information about desirable values; it depends upon a larger "moral ecology"—families, schools, religious communities, traditions, and other institutions that repeatedly embody and reinforce a coherent understanding of what is good and why it matters. Hunter's broader research on moral formation concluded that effective character education requires more than abstract instruction because moral commitments gain much of their force from the communities and institutions in which they are practiced.

Dr. Hunter's argument is not identical to Washington's, but it supplies striking modern support for one important part of Washington's concern: intellectual education and moral formation are not the same thing. A society may dramatically expand knowledge while simultaneously weakening some of the institutions that historically transmitted habits of duty, restraint, responsibility, and sacrifice.

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's decades of research on "social capital" adds another empirical dimension to the same question. Putnam has documented the importance of networks of trust, reciprocity, family and community involvement, churches, voluntary associations, and other social ties to the functioning of civic life; in his comparative research, he found that institutional performance could not simply be explained by wealth or education alone. None of this establishes that religious faith is the only possible source of virtue, but it does reinforce the historical question Washington raised: a free political structure depends upon social and moral resources that the written Constitution itself cannot manufacture. **(James Davison Hunter,** The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil — University of Virginia profile; James Davison Hunter, "Leading Children Beyond Good and Evil"; Robert D. Putnam, Harvard: "Robert Putnam Wants Us to Stop Bowling Alone".)

From a Christian standpoint, this makes Washington's warning especially arresting because Scripture itself never treats knowledge as evil. Biblical wisdom repeatedly commends learning while refusing to confuse knowledge with righteousness, intelligence with holiness, or human capability with moral goodness. **Proverbs 1:7 — NASB** begins its educational vision with the fear of the Lord, while **1 Corinthians 8:1 — NASB** warns that knowledge can become puffed up when divorced from love.

Washington's language was civic rather than theological, but his warning intersects with that older biblical anthropology. Human beings require education, but educated human beings still require moral formation.

## The Question 230 Years Later

Two hundred and thirty years later, the great question for *America's Forgotten Classroom* is therefore larger than whether students can recite George Washington's Farewell Address on an examination. The deeper question is whether we understand the moral architecture beneath his words.

Washington and a number of his contemporaries believed liberty needed virtue, virtue required formation, education participated in that formation, and religion supplied moral authority and habits of conscience that republican government could never completely manufacture through coercion. At the same time, they helped create a federal constitutional order that prohibited religious tests for federal office, constrained federal religious establishment, and protected religious liberty.

Those ideas could coexist because **religious liberty and religious irrelevance were not synonymous** in their political world. The federal government did not need to become a church for religious conviction to remain deeply formative within families, schools, congregations, communities, colleges, and individual consciences.

America now inhabits a cultural environment Washington could scarcely have imagined. Education is vastly more widespread, scientific and technological power immensely greater, religious diversity much broader, and religious disaffiliation far more common than it was within the overwhelmingly Christian institutional environment surrounding the Founding. None of those developments automatically proves Washington correct or incorrect, but together they create historical conditions in which his argument can be examined at a scale he could never have observed.

A Constitution can divide political powers, but it cannot make powerful people honest. A court can administer an oath, but it cannot manufacture reverence for truth. A school can transmit enormous amounts of information without guaranteeing wisdom, while government can punish many destructive acts after they occur without manufacturing every internal restraint that prevents those acts from occurring in the first place.

Washington believed religion and morality helped form those internal restraints. John Adams believed Christianity diffused moral duties throughout society in a way no merely educational or political institution could duplicate. Benjamin Rush went even further, warning that learning detached from religion could actually make "real mischief" of human morals and principles.

Their language comes from another century, but the human problem they were describing has not disappeared. In some respects, greater human knowledge has only raised the stakes because the person lacking moral restraint now possesses capabilities Washington, Adams, and Rush could not have imagined.

Long before tomorrow's presidents, judges, teachers, physicians, entrepreneurs, scientists, soldiers, legislators, parents, pastors, and voters enter the institutions they will someday influence, they sit somewhere as children learning what is true, what is good, what freedom means, what duties accompany it, what human beings are worth, and whether anything ultimately stands morally above themselves.

George Washington believed the future of the Republic reached that far down.

The question for America's forgotten classroom is therefore not merely whether we can remember what Washington wrote **230 years ago**. It is whether we can recover enough historical memory to understand why he believed those words were necessary, examine his proposition with the **reason and experience** he himself invoked, and recognize that after more than two centuries of American history we are now living within the very experiment he warned a free people never to take lightly.

## Next Week in *America's Forgotten Classroom…*

Our investigation next moves naturally from Washington's argument about religion, morality, and republican freedom to another Founding-era question still debated today: **What did the First Amendment actually mean by religious liberty?**

On September 25, 1789, Congress proposed the amendments that became the Bill of Rights. In Classroom 3, we will investigate how the Founding generation distinguished between prohibiting a federal religious establishment and eliminating religion from the lives, consciences, education, and civic participation of American citizens—and why understanding that distinction is essential to reconstructing America's forgotten classroom.

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