

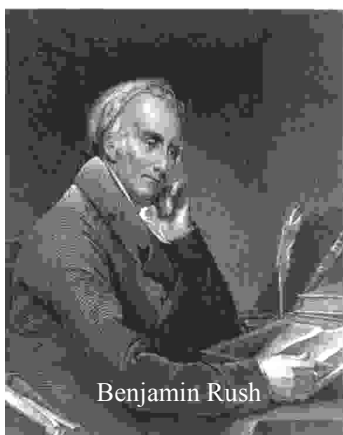
## 5: Education in Religion

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Underlying the concept of the American ideal of liberty is the conviction that only a virtuous and moral people can remain free. Without virtue, people's self-interest, passions and moral weakness in the face of temptation will dominate any concern for the just claims of others; this is a universal trait which arises from the fallen nature of man.

Since democracy depends upon the virtue of the people, it is as much a spiritual and moral enterprise as it is a political system. Many of the issues facing a nation are moral in nature: war, poverty, government-supported child care, definition of marriage, abortion, homosexual rights, minimum wage, access to health care, regulation of media content, disaster relief, toleration, immigration, tax policies, relationship of government to corporations, unrestrained trade, death penalty, and many more. In order to develop consensus on these issues, people must have some commonly agreed upon principles for making moral judgments. If they do not, there will be no basis for public discourse and consensus, and society will be marked by irresolvable discord. Even Thomas Jefferson, who did not profess any sectarian religion, believed in the social utility of religion and that commonly held religious beliefs were required for the smooth functioning of the political system.



Benjamin Rush

Virtue and morality are best instilled through religion. Without belief in a just God, who will judge our Earthly actions and meet out reward or punishment, there is no ground for being moral. A social contract, automatically assumed upon entry into a community, is a weak way to instill societal obligations toward our fellow man, toward human life and its necessities in all of its stages, toward justice. Awareness of a Supreme Being may be innate, but religion must be learned. Benjamin Rush, in 1798, expressed the thinking of many of the leaders of the time, when he wrote: “The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments.”

John Adams' arguments to the people of Massachusetts were reflected in Article III of the Massachusetts Constitution, written in the period 1776-1781. The Article begins: “As the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality, and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community but by...public instructions in piety, religion, and morality...”

Education, from the founding of the country until the mid-1800s, was left primarily to church-established schools. The public or common schools that existed were localized and dependent on the interest and support of local communities. In 1852,

Massachusetts passed the first compulsory education law, and by the end of the century all states had similar statutes requiring students to attend at least elementary school. The arguments were that improved education would create virtuous, literate citizens, unite society, especially with the increase in immigration, create social stability, prevent crime, and reduce poverty.

The movement toward compulsory education and the transfer of responsibility from the church to the state was highly significant. The state now assumed responsibility for assuring a virtuous people, and most public schools inculcated moral virtues in their students but in a non-sectarian, although generally-Protestant sense. One of the ways that they did this was through the use of a series of graded readers developed by William Holmes McGuffey, who was a professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, as well as a Presbyterian minister. Based on his knowledge of the eighteenth-century Puritans' *New England Primer*, Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book*, and the *Bible*, McGuffey developed over the course of twenty years, beginning in 1836, a series of six readers and a spelling book. They contained stories of widely varied subject matter appealing to youngsters, laced with religious, moral, and ethical principles. Over the generations of their use, the readers were revised and their content evolved, moving away from the original Calvinist values of salvation, righteousness, and piety to reflect the morality and cultural values of a broader American society that had incorporated religion within the civil structure. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the children of the emerging middle class were taught morality, good character, and given a common knowledge and worldview. The McGuffey readers had a profound influence on public education in the United States. By 1920 over 122 million copies had been sold.

Instilling unifying moral principles does not require uniformity in religious education. America's history has shown that the basic moral concepts necessary for a republic to function can be taught through a wide variety of sectarian beliefs. The nation's approach to religious pluralism has worked. However, until the last few decades, neutrality toward religion meant an equal treatment of all religious beliefs. This view has morphed first into equal treatment for religion and anti-religion, and more recently into an exclusion of any recognition of religion or religious beliefs in public schools. The efforts to remove all references to God, coupled with the license to address any non-religious topic, regardless of how it may offend the traditional mores of the community, have made our schools irreligious. The result is that the children being taught are not learning to ask the questions which arise from religion, and certainly not learning the answers religion teaches.