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RELIGION’S INFLUENCES ON THE WALL OF SEPARATION: INSIGHTS FROM ROGER WILLIAMS, JAMES BURGH, AND THOMAS JEFFERSON

Benjamin J. Hertzberg

Abstract

Considering the views of three prominent advocates of a “wall of separation” between church and state (Roger Williams, James Burgh, and Thomas Jefferson), this article critiques some modern Americans’ use of the wall of separation metaphor as an argument against religious influence on political opinion. Inasmuch as some Americans argue the wall of separation between church and state demands purely secular political views, their arguments are in unjustifiable contradiction with the three most prominent early advocates of church-state separation and the wall metaphor itself.

Introduction

When Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black quoted Thomas Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1947 to argue that the first amendment demanded a “wall of separation between church and state” (330 U.S. 1), no one knew the radical changes his decision would affect on church–state interaction in the United States. The wall of separation metaphor now dominates American legal and political thought about the proper relationship between the two institutions. Daniel Dreisbach asserts: “No phrase in American letters has more profoundly influenced discourse and policy on church–state relations” (Dreisbach 2002, 5). Philip Hamburger complains that even those “who attempt to wiggle free from the clear implications of Jefferson’s phrase make no effort to shake off the phrase itself” (Hamburger 2002, 9). Today, most Americans believe the first amendment demands a wall of separation.
Given this prominence, it is surprising that scholars have not more rigorously and theoretically analyzed the wall of separation metaphor. The legal implications and historical development of the metaphor have been hashed and rehashed hundreds of times. Certainly the influence and ubiquity of the metaphor demand it receive this type of treatment. Few works, however, analyze the metaphor theoretically—asking, for example, if it can appropriately guide American political thought about the relationship between religion and politics in general. Such a question is particularly important today, as public discussion of the wall of separation metaphor grows more contentious. If America is to move toward resolution of the internecine debate about religion’s proper role in politics, the wall of separation metaphor must be carefully analyzed, not only as a legal doctrine mediating the relationship between the institutions of “Church” and “State” but also as a fundamental part of the way Americans understand the relationship between religion and politics.

In order to consider the wall metaphor’s proper place in American political thought, this article will analyze the political opinions and biographical context of three early proponents of the wall of separation metaphor: Roger Williams, James Burgh, and Thomas Jefferson. Investigation shows all three thinkers limited their respective walls of separation to public institutions. Each believed church and state should be publicly separated; none of their arguments led them to separate religion from politics in their personal views. All three thinkers consciously considered the political implications of their religious beliefs. In stark contrast, today many cite the wall of separation metaphor to argue that Americans must decisively remove religious influence from politics, even in individuals’ private political opinions. Such a construal of the wall of separation fundamentally changes the metaphor, making it restrain instead of protect religious freedom. Analysis of Williams’s, Burgh’s, and Jefferson’s opinions shows they could not have consistently understood the wall of separation in such a way, for they advocated separation of church and state as a result of religious influences on their political thought.

Modern Americans’ tendency to misconstrue the wall of separation metaphor as an argument against religious influence on political opinion arises, in part, from the way the democratic mind treats metaphors. Alexis de Tocqueville explains that individuals in a democracy tend to think in broad, general terms; equal social conditions make citizens so similar it
is difficult for them to conceive of meaningful differences between one individual and another. As a result, their thought retreats to general platitudes about human nature instead of rigorous, particular understanding of differences (Tocqueville 2000, 411–15). In many respects, the entire recent history of church-state separation is a manifestation of this democratic penchant for general ideas. The Warren Court in particular is infamous for unyieldingly applying universal formulas like the wall of separation. However, the unyielding application of general metaphors like the wall of separation is not the most serious implication of Tocqueville’s observations. His analysis also suggests that democratic minds push ideas from their intended spheres into other, unintended spheres as they generalize them. Once within the democratic mind; the arenas to which a given idea is applied inevitably expand—the democratic mind does not respect incidental particularities like philosophical or political limits. As Tocqueville implied, American thought has pushed the wall of separation metaphor beyond its intended sphere in just this way. Arguments that particular moral or religious opinions have no place in politics because there should be a “wall of separation between church and state,” or that individuals who vote in accord with their religious views infringe upon the same separation, violate the metaphor’s intended limit to the public sphere. Such a use of the metaphor implies that individuals should gather up their opinions into one sphere labeled “church” or “religion” and another labeled “state” or “politics.” Accordingly, individuals are actually obliged to avoid examining the implications of one sphere upon the other—or at least to avoid acting on those implications. Not only must church and state be publicly separated, religion and politics must be likewise separated, even in individuals’ most private beliefs.

In his recent and acclaimed work on the separation of church and state, Hamburger quite by accident demonstrates the way the democratic mind pushes the wall of separation beyond the public sphere. He accuses those who have supported the separation of church and state of inappropriately compartmentalizing their lives:

The separation of church and state had particular appeal in an age of specialization. Separation often attracted individuals who—whether in fact or in their minds—divided their lives into distinct activities and sought to maintain their freedom within each such activity by restricting the demands of the
others. Jefferson, his allies, and many subsequent Americans attempted, on occasion, to limit religion to a private, personal, or nonpolitical realm so that it would not intrude too much (whether by force of law or only by force of argument) on various other aspects of their lives. To such Americans, the moral claims of an entirely voluntary, disestablished church could seem threatening. Accordingly, increasing numbers of Americans attempted to escape these constraining demands of churches by welcoming various separations between organized religion and other facets of their lives, particularly a separation between church and state. (Hamburger 2002, 16)

For Hamburger, personal compartmentalization of religion and politics is the first step. After citizens separate religion and politics in their private beliefs, they attempt to bring about the same separation in the public realm. Such a formulation may perhaps be true of separationists in more modern eras, the focus of Hamburger's analysis. Yet analyzing the first proponents of separation of church and state—Williams, Burgh, and Jefferson—shows, in direct contrast with Hamburger's assertions, that each rigorously examined the political implications of his religious beliefs. They did not rigidly compartmentalize their thought. Hamburger's failure to notice this important aspect demonstrates how far contemporary Americans have pushed the wall of separation beyond its original intent. If Jefferson and those who influenced him advocated public separation of church and state, Hamburger seems to argue, they must also have separated religion and politics in their private beliefs. But Hamburger fails to notice that early proponents of the wall of separation strictly limited it to public institutions. For them, the wall of separation did not demand that they segregate their religious ideals from their politics; indeed, it was the natural outgrowth of those ideals. Williams, Burgh, and Jefferson, then, could not have compartmentalized their religious opinions from their political views, for rigorous personal analysis of their religion led them to political support for the wall of separation.

Roger Williams: Debunking Massachusetts Bay

Including Roger Williams in an analysis of the wall of separation metaphor is surprisingly controversial. Although the obstinate New England minister was probably the first ever to use a type of wall metaphor to advocate the separation of church and state, his work was not influential
in early America. Williams published his works in England, and colonial American libraries did not carry his writings (Hall 1998, 116–17; Dreisbach 2002, 78). Whatever influence Williams had on the development of the wall metaphor seems to have been indirect.

Yet Williams cannot be dismissed so easily. Timothy Hall argues that while the Supreme Court has historically favored Jefferson’s rendition of the wall metaphor, this favoring is “historically untenable” (Hall 1998, 117). He explains that early American separation of church and state owes just as much, if not more, to Protestant dissenters, who were in rich abundance in colonial America. Whether or not Roger Williams’s influence on more famous early American political writers can be demonstrated or not is less relevant, for he “is a key theoretician of [the believing, dissenting Protestant] parentage” (Hall 1998, 117). As a dissenting Protestant in America, Williams put forth ideas were the beginning of a tradition that some believe was more influential than Jefferson’s thought or that of other Enlightenment-inspired thinkers. Any full analysis of the wall of separation metaphor needs to examine Williams.

Williams, in turn, cannot be understood without examining the historical context of his life and thought. He was born in England, became a Puritan, then a Separatist, and then immigrated to Massachusetts Bay early in the history of the colony (Morgan 1967, 24–25). Massachusetts Bay in the early seventeenth century was an exceptional place. By lucky oversight, the Bay Company’s charter did not specify a meeting place for the company members. English trading companies of the day typically met in England, allowing the Crown to oversee their dealings. The mistake in the charter allowed the Bay Company to move their meetings to Massachusetts itself and avoid the Crown’s influence (Morgan 1999, 40–41). The Puritans who made up the majority of the company’s membership took advantage of this unique opportunity—without royal interference, the Bay Colony would be free to pursue Puritanism without harassment or corruption. The company could become a holy experiment, a “spearhead of world Protestantism” (Morgan 1999, 41).

Engaged in such important work, the Bay Company members had a high sense of their own purpose. They believed themselves to be the inheritors of God’s covenant with ancient Israel, and as such, the Old Testament was the model for their ideal society (Hall 1998, 74). Consistent with their focus on the Old Testament, covenants were essential to
Puritans' political thought; they believed both religious and political societies were and should be established by covenant. This process involved two steps which they generally combined. First, individuals covenanted with each other and with God to form a society; next, they chose their rulers in the name of God. Morgan explains: "Although the only visible activity in forming the covenants was on the part of the people or their rulers, God was thought to be a party to all the proceedings. It was his power, not their own, that the people gave to the rulers" (Morgan 1967, 87–88, emphasis added). Because the Bay Colony was a covenant-bound community, its rulers felt obligated to maintain both morality and true religion; they could not tolerate religious dissent in any form. The Bay Colonists felt such dissent was dangerous because it broke God's covenant and threatened to bring down His punishment on them, especially if it was widely disseminated (Hall 1998, 79–80). As a result, though the institutions of church and state were technically separated in the Bay Colony, the Puritans there could not tolerate religious pluralism in any form (Morgan 1965, xxvi). John Winthrop's handling of dissidents like Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson demonstrates the harsh way the Bay Colony treated the unorthodox (Morgan 1999, 102–37).

Roger Williams's life-long project was a point-by-point refutation of the Bay Colony's conception of politics, and he did so (as would have made sense to him and his contemporaries) from an explicitly religious standpoint (Morgan 1967, 86). Williams's argument revolved around two related points: First, the Catholic antichrist destroyed all authorization to act in God's name during the Middle Ages, and second, without that authorization the Puritan covenant with God was blasphemy. Therefore, the Bay Colonists' attempt to regulate individuals' religious beliefs and practices was also blasphemy, a truly "bloody tenet of persecution."

Williams came to believe God had revoked the authority to act in His name, the authority Puritans claimed in their covenant making, when he was searching for his own divine authorization to preach to the unconverted. Puritans agreed that ministers could legitimately lead their congregations because they were selected by those congregations. Puritans voted on their ministers and instated them in office in a manner very similar to their political leaders (Morgan 1967, 40–42, 87–88). Williams believed that this authorization did not extend to the unconverted, for they were not members of any church and therefore did not participate in selecting ministers.
The unconverted were, in effect, outside of any duly authorized Puritan minister's "jurisdiction" (Morgan 1967, 41). Yet Williams believed with other Puritans that conversion to the gospel came only through hearing God's Word. He thus had to face an unpleasant question: "If conversion must be preceded by preaching, and if ministers must preach only to the converted [members of the church], how is the circle to be broken?" (Morgan 1967, 42, insertion added). Williams desperately wanted to be an evangelist—to preach Christianity to the unconverted, yet he could find no authorization in the Bible to do so. The early apostles received their authority directly from Christ, and their ministry was the only biblical precedent for the type of preaching Williams hoped to do. Without a direct commission from Christ, Williams could not engage in the apostolic ministry he desired.

Yet Williams believed that receiving such a commission was impossible. Churches in his day traced their authority back to Christ through the Catholic Church—Williams's antichrist. It was this very Catholic Church that, in Williams's mind, was responsible for ending the apostolic ministry and corrupting Christ's Church. Williams could not believe that Christ's authority could be traced through the antichrist itself, so he was forced to conclude that the antichrist had permanently ended the apostolic ministry. It could only be restored as it was established—through the personal ministry of Jesus Christ (Morgan 1967, 46–47). Williams did not see this restoration in his day either, and without it both his efforts to preach to the unconverted and the authority claims of all Christian churches were suspect. Lacking apostolic authority, they were merely an earthly gathering of like-minded individuals—God was not in their organization (Morgan 1967, 89).

The political implications of such a conclusion are clear. If Williams held the claims to authority Puritan ministers asserted in contempt, then the political claims Winthrop and others made were at least as illegitimate. As with the Church, Williams sought evidence that God had covenanted with the Bay colonists in establishing their holy society. "Where and when and how, he wanted to know, did God transfer his powers to the people or anyone else?" (Morgan 1967, 88). Without evidence of God's involvement with the Bay Colony's covenant, Williams could not believe that Winthrop or anyone else had the authority they claimed to enforce true religion. God had made his presence and involvement with ancient Israel abundantly clear; they had legitimately claimed His authorization.
in government. The Bay Colony, however, was different. Arguing as they did without proper evidence that their government was divine was blasphemy—acting in God's name without His approval (Morgan 1967, 89). Furthermore, without evidence of God's authorization, the Puritans' claim that they were the inheritors of God's covenant with Israel was likewise suspect (Hall 1998, 76-77). This led Williams to disdain not only the Bay Colony's public enforcement of religion, but also their entire holy experiment—it was an "unholy delusion" (Morgan 1967, 103). Claiming to be God's Israel without justification was blasphemy. The Bay Colony, like all other governments and like the various Christian churches, was merely an organization of men, necessary, but not divine.

Williams's conclusion that governments are purely secular—created without authorization from God—led to his final conclusion: Charging the government to enforce true religion was also blasphemy. Believing that government was authorized to establish true religion meant believing that a secular organization should rule over the church—the only, albeit limited, place where people could interact with God. It was an untenable contradiction as blasphemous as the Bay Colony's claim to be a modern Israel (Morgan 1967, 94-96). As a result, Williams could argue the following, the source of his own wall metaphor: "When they [members of God's Church] have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the Church and the wilderness of the world, God has ever broken down the wall itself, removed the candlestick, and made his garden a wilderness, as at this day (Williams 1963, emphasis and insertion added). Blasphemously assuming God's authority in government and thereby seeking to enforce religion with state power was the very reason God had removed His authority from the Catholic Church anciently (Morgan 1967, 96). In Williams's day, the situation was the same: Government sought to enforce religion illegitimately, and the garden of the church remained a wilderness, bereft of God's influence.

Williams's justification for separating church and state was supremely religious. Believing that no secular organization could assume God's authority, Williams argued that no government, the Bay Colony's or otherwise, could legitimately enforce religion. If there was someone, somewhere, who could justifiably claim God's authority, the situation would be different, as it was in ancient Israel. But such a person was absent, and hence the church needed to be kept separate from the wilderness
of the world, for if humans attempted to command God through their desires to establish a state church, God would remove whatever remnants of true religion remained. Williams’s wall could not have demanded the strict removal of religious influence from political opinions as some use the wall of separation today. Indeed, such a construal of the wall would undermine the very arguments Williams used to justify it. Without considering the political implications of his religious beliefs, Williams could not have argued for the separation of church and state.

James Burgh: Moral Regeneration and Church–State Separation

James Burgh was a late eighteenth-century Scottish reformer in London who is relatively unknown today despite his considerable influence on the American Founders. Jefferson himself recommended Burgh’s most famous work, *Political Disquisitions*, to his son-in-law, and Daniel Dreisbach reports that “Jefferson read and admired the Scotsman’s work and almost certainly encountered Burgh’s use of the ‘wall of separation’ metaphor in his extensive readings” (Dreisbach 2002, 79, 81). Indeed, *Political Disquisitions* was a famous, influential text in late eighteenth-century America; its list of “encouragers” included Samuel Chase, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush (Burgh 1775). Excerpts appeared in print from Kentucky to Holland (Hay 1979, 111). Although Burgh does not reference the wall of separation in *Political Disquisitions*—the reference comes from his *Crito* (Burgh 1766, 68)—it is likely that this work was as widely read as his others. As with Williams, analysis of Burgh’s thought on the separation of church and state shows his position depends on the influence of his religion on his politics.

Burgh held remarkably firm religious convictions. Carla Hay, one of the few scholars to publish extensively on Burgh, explains: “The mainspring of James Burgh’s character and conduct was a moral code grounded in his religious convictions. It dominated his personal and professional relationships and occasioned his literary career. Neither Burgh nor his writings can be understood apart from this reality” (Hay 1979, 49). Burgh believed in public worship; he thought that “organized religion was the most valid expression of man’s religious needs and duties,” and he was a confirmed, faithful Protestant even though he doubted his religious upbringing. He also defended the Bible as “the sole rule of Christianity” and believed in prayer, revelation, miracles, and moral absolutes (Hay 1979,
Burgh did not simply believe his religion, though—he had to convince others of the truths he knew. Hay calls Burgh “an activist whose concept of Christian commitment made him a natural evangelist, born to strive for the hearts of men” (Hay 1979, 92). This evangelical tendency led Burgh to his publishing career.

Hay records that Burgh was raised in an orthodox Scottish Presbyterian home as the son of a minister and then went to London in search of a viable livelihood. In London, he was shocked at the immorality he observed and “embarked on a lifelong crusade for the moral regeneration of his adopted homeland” (Hay 1979, 92). The London Burgh saw was a frightful place for the moral and religious:

The men of new wealth were building homes of unprecedented lavishness. There were clubs of quite another sort. Grocers made rich by speculation, nabobs come back from the colonies, gentry bored with life in their estates flocked to the capital and threw themselves into an unabashed quest for wealth and pleasure. Debauchery spread through the habits of new and old families: to gamble, to drink oneself into a stupor, to dally promiscuously with mistresses and lovers were accepted conventions of a society in which no one knew his place or station and in which obligations had no binding quality. (Handlin and Handlin 1961, 43)

Burgh’s outrage led him to his first publications, which were filled with polemical cries for moral regeneration. His interest in politics began later. Significantly influenced by Lord Bolingbroke’s ideas of the Patriot-King, Burgh hoped for an end to the corruption and immorality in English society when young George III assumed the throne. Finally, he thought, England had a chance to be led by a truly enlightened monarch, one untouched by the woes of factionalism and political infighting. But Burgh was disappointed; George III became the focal point of intense political conflict and actually increased corruption. Burgh’s dismay led him to his first political work, the unpublished “Remarks Historical and Political,” in which he lectured “the new monarch on his moral and political responsibilities as if he were an adolescent schoolboy” (Hay 1979, 92–99). In the next few years, Burgh’s disappointment deepened, and he began to fear that Britain’s mixed constitution would be replaced by a tyrannical, aristocratic regime. Hay explains: “Believing that ‘no nation ever was very corrupt under a long continued virtuous government, nor virtuous under
a long continued vicious administration’ [Burgh] was metamorphosed into one of the earliest and most vigorous spokesmen for radical reform during the first decades of George III’s reign” (Hay 1979, 101). The Handlins concur that, though originally interested only in morality, “his environment and the temper of the times” led Burgh to politics (Handlin and Handlin 1961, 42). His political action grew naturally from his firm, religiously inspired, moral beliefs. He eventually realized the importance the political realm had upon the moral state of his country and began to agitate for radical reform in addition to moral regeneration. Burgh’s political desires were an expression of his religious morality.

Among the many reforms Burgh advocated was the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, and he uses the wall of separation metaphor to argue for disestablishment. Burgh writes in the *Crito*:

I will fairly tell you what will be the consequences of your setting up such a mixed-mungrel-spiritual-temporal-secular-ecclesiastical establishment. You will make the dispensers of religion *despicable and odious* to all men of sense, and will destroy the *spirituality*, in which consists the whole *value* of religion. . . . Put into the hands of the *people* the clerical emoluments; and let them give them who they will. . . . We have in our times a proof . . . that such a scheme will . . . prevent infinite corruption;—*ecclesiastical* corruption; the most odious of all corruption.

*Build an impenetrable wall of separation* between things *sacred* and *civil*. . . . To *profane* . . . a religion, which you pretend to *reverence*; is an impiety sufficient to bring down upon your heads, the roof of the sacred building you thus defile. (Burgh 1766, italics in original)

Burgh certainly did not have a problem with strong condemnations. Just as his firm religious beliefs led Burgh to politics, they also led him to argue for a “wall of separation between things sacred and civil.” The selection above demonstrates Burgh’s reasoning: Mixing religion with government in the public sphere leads to ecclesiastical corruption as priests and ministers become more concerned with their funding than with saving souls or preaching the Word. Indeed, although those who seek to commingle religion and government do so with the interests of the Church in mind, they actual defile religion with worldly influences. Such commingling not only leads to corruption, it destroys the very religion it attempts to establish.
Burgh's religious commitment is evident in the Crito passage. Ecclesiastical corruption is "the most odious of all corruption"; it is dangerous because it will destroy religion, not government. This and other religious beliefs led him to advocate separating church and state. Burgh demands purity from the sacred, and this purity requires separation from government's worldly influence. The themes in the Crito reference are not isolated in Burgh's work. Political Disquisitions contains similar language, though Burgh does not specifically make a wall of separation reference:

Governments have it not in their power to do their subjects the least service as to their religious belief and mode of worship. On the contrary, whenever the civil magistrate interposes his authority in matter of religion, otherwise than in keeping the peace amongst all religious parties, you may trace every step he has taken by the mischievous effects his interposition has produced. (Burgh 1775, 202, italics by author)

This is more of the same: Religion is outside of the government's authority, and government's attempts to influence it have terrible results. He later writes: "By . . . labouring for the establishment of what they are pleased to call the true church . . . they open to themselves a direct path to enslaving the people" (Burgh 1775, 203). When the government controls religion it leads to servitude. What's more, the government could and should use its influence for other, better purposes. The government, he argues, "by guiding [the people] into right, moral, and political principles and manners . . . might enable them to judge soundly of the conduct of those in power, and inspire them with a noble spirit of resistance to tyranny" (Burgh 1775, 203). Establishing religion is a terrible case of misused power. Government could teach the people political virtue—how to avoid tyranny and the inevitable moral corruption it brings. Yet instead, governments support specific churches and corrupt religion instead of enlightening the people. As a result, England is not only deprived of pure religious institutions, it is also deprived of the moral fiber that could enable it to resist tyranny and corruption. For Burgh, separating church and state is one step in getting the state to properly use its power to teach the people morality and resistance to tyranny. His hopes for moral regeneration in England demanded that he advocate the separation of church and state.

Thus, the influence of religion on Burgh's politics is obvious. Motivated by religious conviction to advocate moral regeneration in London,
Burgh eventually realized that moral regeneration was linked to politics. Corrupt politics leads to corrupt people, so Burgh the moralist became Burgh the political radical. His advocacy for the separation of church and state was intimately tied up with these desires. The government was misusing its considerable moral authority establishing religion and thereby corrupting religion while ignoring the political education of the people. Separating church and state was a necessary step in both preserving the sacred nature of the church and getting the government to do its part in bringing about England’s moral regeneration. Like Williams’s, Burgh’s wall of separation was inspired by his religious beliefs. Construing the wall as separating religion from politics even in one’s private beliefs would undermine the beliefs that led Burgh to advocate church–state separation. Religion taught Burgh the importance of a nation’s morality, and to preserve that morality Burgh advocated the wall of separation.

**Thomas Jefferson: Enlightenment Politics and Religion**

Analysis of the wall of separation metaphor would of course be incomplete without including Thomas Jefferson, the most famous proponent of the phrase. Jefferson’s political and religious views remain controversial nearly two hundred years after the pinnacle of his career. He also presents the greatest possible objection to the argument of this article. Of all the early advocates of church–state separation, Jefferson is both the most rigorous and the most religiously heterodox. Indeed, as cited above, Hamburger feels that Jefferson is the first of a long line of separationists who felt that religion has no place in politics, whether in the public sphere or in individuals’ private beliefs (Hamburger 2002, 16). While Jefferson’s religious views are indeed heterodox, they still played an important part in his advocacy of church–state separation, especially later in his life. Jefferson, like Williams and Burgh, could not have consistently argued the wall of separation was meant to completely remove religious influence from politics, for his religious beliefs influenced his political opinions.

Understanding Jefferson’s religious tolerance begins with his belief in “Nature’s God” and Scottish moral sense philosophy. Even early in his life, when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, for example, Jefferson believed in “Nature’s God,” the Deists’ God who created the universe according to regular, natural laws and then left it and the humans he created to occupy it alone (Jayne 1998, 139). Jefferson believed this
Deists' God had given all humans moral sense to enable them to distinguish right from wrong. Jefferson wrote: "The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm" (Jefferson 1950, 14–15). Richard Matthews explains that for Jefferson, "Morality is a matter of the senses, not of the intellect; appropriately, nature has given to man a moral sense that enables him, without the aid of calculation, to differentiate right from wrong" (Matthews 1984, 60). The implications of this belief are radical, especially for Jefferson's time: If every individual is endowed by Nature's God with the ability to discern right from wrong for him- or herself, then inherited political authority and traditional state establishment of religion lose legitimacy. No longer can the state justifiably proscribe an individual's religious decisions; the individual should choose his or her beliefs alone. Significantly, Jefferson argues that the moral sense works "without calculation"; at another point Jefferson explained that God "would have been a pitiful bungler" if he had made morality an abstract, technical endeavor like science. For every scientist, there are a thousand who cannot understand his or her ideas, and Jefferson wonders "What would have become of them?" (Jefferson 1950, 14–15). For Jefferson, all individuals have, to some degree or another, the ability to choose right and wrong for themselves. This implies that those individuals also have the right to choose their religion. The state should not abridge individuals' moral views by forcing them to believe or to say they believe. Humans should be taught, not coerced.

Religious toleration derives directly from Jefferson's belief in individual moral sense. Allen Jayne explains: "Having endowed each individual with the faculty of reason, Nature's God, the God of reason, left individuals alone to find religious truth and God with that faculty" (Jayne 1998, 139). Regardless of whether scholars speak of moral sense or reason, however, the implications are the same: God gave humans the ability to determine right from wrong individually, and thus, for Jefferson, compelling individuals to believe is morally reprehensible. Jefferson took this belief seriously. When an amendment was proposed to change Virginia's statute of religious freedom to protect only Christians, Jefferson objected and argued that the law was meant to protect not only Christians but also Jews, Muslims, Hindus, even the "Infidel," a position shockingly tolerant in his day (Jayne 1998, 156). Jayne goes on to argue that the reverence Jefferson felt for the first amendment—his desire to separate church and state—stemmed from the moral duty Jefferson felt to tolerate all religions (Jayne 1998, 158).
Believing, then, that Nature's God had endowed humans with the ability to determine right from wrong (either through moral sense or reason), Jefferson could not justify state efforts to compel religious belief, whether through establishing a state church or broadly protecting Christianity.

The preceding are opinions Jefferson appears to have held during the early Declaration of Independence/Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom stage of his life, later during his presidency, and after. Importantly, however, Jefferson became markedly more religious during his presidency. While never joining a traditional Christian sect and still holding many heterodox views, Jefferson began to adopt aspects of Christian morality. It was in this phase of his life that Jefferson wrote the Letter to the Danbury Baptists, in which he mentioned the wall of separation.

At this later stage in his life, Jefferson's personal philosophy became an interesting mix of Epicurus, whom he ostensibly admired throughout his life, and what he termed the "real" teachings of Jesus. Matthews explains that while Jefferson felt Epicurus an effective guide for personal decisions, he also thought Epicurean hedonism inappropriately limited political action and political community. To complement Epicurus, Jefferson added Jesus' moral ideals, unadulterated by the "Platonists." As Matthews points out, this enabled him to believe that political communities were a natural part of human life, distinguishing him from Madison, Hamilton, and other contemporaries dominated by various forms of Lockean liberalism (Matthews 1984, 91–93). For them, political communities were not natural; they had to be agreed upon or imposed. Epicurean hedonisms' over-compartmentalization, its over-privatization of life led, Jefferson to Jesus' moral teachings.

Jefferson also came to believe that God, while not intervening directly in human affairs, would hold men accountable for their actions, and Jesus' teachings were the most pure moral code to teach humans how to conduct those actions (Jefferson 1989, 350). In a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse, Jefferson outlines what he believes to be the pure teachings of Jesus, which "tend toward the happiness of man." His belief and devotion to these teachings allowed the later Jefferson to consider himself a Christian. He explains that the sum of Christ's teachings is

that there is one God, and he is all perfect:

that there is a future state of rewards and punishments:
that to love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thysel. is the sum of religion. (Jefferson 1989, 405)

Jefferson referred to himself as a Christian, though not in the traditional sense. He felt he was a Christian in the sense Jesus himself intended, before his teachings were corrupted by Platonic philosophy (Jefferson 1989, 331, 365). This was Jefferson's rational Christianity, the nearest he ever came to adopting a traditional religion.

Later in his life, Jefferson mixed a hope that his form of rational Christianity would gain prominence in America with his original moral duty to be religiously tolerant. He believed that if only people were free from religious oppression they would come to see the truth of his own position. To Jared Sparks he argues: "If the freedom of religion, guaranteed by law in theory, can ever rise in practice under the overbearing inquisition of public opinion, truth will prevail over fanaticism, and the genuine doctrines of Jesus . . . will again be restored to their original purity" (Jefferson 1989, 402, italics in original). Later Jefferson writes similarly: "Had [Jesus'] doctrines, pure as they came from himself, been never sophisticated for unworthy purposes, the whole civilised world would at this day have formed a single sect" (Jefferson 1989, 404). The late Jefferson speaks much like the adherent of a minority religion: Religious tolerance is important because it allows others to see the virtues of his position.

Jefferson's religious toleration led to separation of church and state for other reasons as well. He was suspicious of clergy and theological debate. Not only were the religions and theologies of his day authoritarian, Jefferson's belief in Nature's God and in individual moral sense led him to disregard theology in general. Jefferson explained to William Canby: "I believe . . . that he who steadily observes those moral precepts in which all religions concur, will never be questioned, at the gates of heaven, as to the dogmas in which they all differ" (Jefferson 1989, 350). Instead of theological distinctions, living the teachings of religion was most important to Jefferson. It would be utterly absurd for him to assign political privileges based on religious differences, for doing so gave too much importance to the very theological distinctions he felt were so irrelevant.

With the above background in mind, the consistency between the text of Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists and the rest of his views is clear. Jefferson wrote:

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Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith and worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and state. (Jefferson 1802)

The Danbury Letter is a summary of Jefferson's views about religious toleration. It is consistent with his ideas as expressed elsewhere. Religion is a personal matter, and government should not intervene in personal matters. In order to protect individuals from such intervention, the first amendment builds a wall of separation between church and state.

At this time in Jefferson's life the wall of separation is a product of several different aspects of his thought. It most certainly stems from his belief in individual moral sense: Because Nature's God has bestowed humans with at least some ability to determine right from wrong individually, the state should not endeavor to take that choice away from its citizens. Jefferson's advocacy of the wall of separation may also reflect the influence of his more religious ideals, his desire to give Americans the freedom to see through the sophistry of traditional Christian sects and come to adopt a more rational, "Christian" Christianity. The question remains, however, if Jefferson's advocacy of the wall of separation resembles Williams's and Burgh's more explicitly religious justifications of it.

Jefferson's views are radically different from both Williams and Burgh. Jefferson was educated in philosophy and his ideas display a familiarity with it that both Williams and Burgh lack. He is also less religious than both of them. However, Hamburger's claim that Jefferson compartmentalized his religious beliefs from his political opinions, implying that his religion did not influence his politics (or, for that matter, that his politics did not affect his religion), is an unjustified exaggeration. He was less religious than many of his contemporaries, and he was suspicious of traditional Christianity, but that is not to say that he was irreligious. Jefferson believed in God. He believed God had given humans their conscience and would hold them accountable for their actions in the afterlife. He did not believe Jesus was divine, but he did believe that Jesus' teachings comprised the best morality he had ever found. These opinions
influenced his thought, especially later in his life when he wrote the Letter to the Danbury Baptists. Though his justification for the separation of church and state is not as explicitly religious as Williams’s or Burgh’s, it still relies upon the political implications of his religious opinions. Moral sense, an endowment from God, is a religious view, especially in today’s context. Furthermore, both Jefferson’s religious and political views were similarly radical, and that radicalism was a consequence of his application of moral sense philosophy and the “true” teachings of Jesus to both his religion and his politics. Jefferson’s wall, then, like Williams’s and Burgh’s, cannot be meant to remove religious influence from personal political beliefs. Jefferson’s unique, heterodox religious opinions influenced his advocacy of the wall of separation, just as his political egalitarianism and belief in moral sense influenced his religious opinions. Construing Jefferson’s use of the wall metaphor as an attempt to eliminate religious influence from political opinion would contradict the roots of Jefferson’s own advocacy of the wall of separation.

Conclusions

While Jefferson, Burgh, and Williams were obviously thinkers very different from each other, their differences do not undermine the similarities behind their advocacy of the wall of separation. Each believed in the wall for different reasons. Jefferson’s theories of human nature and moral sense demanded releasing individuals from authoritarian political institutions, including state establishments of religion. The individual should be free to choose his or her path and establishing a state church abrogated that freedom. Burgh felt state churches led to the corruption both of religion and of national morality; the government, instead of using state power to educate the nation’s political virtues, wasted its energy establishing religion. Separating church and state was a way to get the government to attend to its educational duties. Williams advocated separation of church and state because he felt no government could claim the authority of God Moses exercised necessary to abridge an individual’s religious choice. Punishing individuals for their religious views was blasphemously assuming God’s authority.

As disparate as their reasons for advocating church–state separation were, all three thinkers had one important point in common: their belief in separation was, at least in part, a result of the political implications
of their religious views. Jefferson's belief that the Deists' God bestowed individuals with moral sense significantly influenced his politics, and Burgh's and Williams's political views both grew directly out of their religious convictions. Burgh's religious desire for moral regeneration led him to advocate church-state separation, while Williams's denial that any human on earth, in religion or politics, held God's authority pushed him in the same direction. All three thinkers' respective "walls of separation" owed much to the influence of religion on their politics.

It is clear, then, that modern Americans' attempt to reinterpret the wall of separation metaphor as a description of the proper relationship between religion and politics in general, including within individuals' personal opinions, instead of its intended use as a metaphor to describe the proper public relationship between the institutions of church and state, inappropriately stretches the metaphor's application. While the metaphor may be an appropriate description of the way Church and State are to interact publicly, it cannot be used to guide the interaction of religion and politics more generally, especially not within the realm of private opinion. All three early advocates of the wall of separation—Williams, Burgh, and Jefferson—did so in part because of the political implications of their religious views. Indeed, all three early users of the metaphor consciously considered the implications of their religion on their politics and vice versa. Construing the wall metaphor as a guide for the relationship of religion and politics in general undermines the foundation upon which the early proponents of church-state separation built their wall, the foundation of religiously informed political opinion. Today, if civil libertarians are concerned about public violations of the wall of separation, they would do well to consider whether the wall crumbles now because Americans no longer seem as concerned about the political implications and demands of their waning religious convictions.
**Works Cited**


