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Reflection on George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Religion in the Public Sphere

Founding Fathers. Virginians. Slaveholders. United States Presidents. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson's historical legacy hold many things in common. While Jefferson leaves behind a treasure trove of letters and personal writings that speak to his beliefs and fears concerning almost every aspect of his life experience, Washington's careful maintenance of a reserved reputation makes it more difficult to ascertain what he believed and how he felt on many issues. This is particularly evident in regards to religion. As discussed in lecture, Washington's religious views are, at best, open to discussion and interpretation. Because Washington did not leave behind a statement of belief, and his actions in regards to his personal religious practices are inconsistent, commentators interested in projecting their own beliefs onto Washington and claiming him as their own, have a less arduous job than if they were to do the same with Jefferson.

For my final project I will reflect upon George Washington and Thomas Jefferson's views concerning religion in the public sphere. Drawing from correspondence and official acts, I will consider their views on first amendment religious liberties—free exercise and separation.

Religious liberties were seen as an important aspect of a stable republic. As Bernstein stated in lecture, Washington believed religion was the basis for the masses to develop virtue. Virtue was required in order to insure a republic and a republican government

was the guardian of liberty. Therefore, religious liberty was necessary in order to maintain a republican government. In his Farewell address, Washington writes, “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.” Additionally, Washington stresses the importance of education in establishing a virtuous society. In a 1784 letter to George Chapman, Washington writes, “the best means of forming a manly, virtuous and happy people, will be found in the right education of youth. Without this foundation, every other means, in my opinion, must fail.”

Jefferson also views education as the formation of virtue. In an 1822 letter to Cornelius Camden Blatchly, Jefferson writes, “I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the conditions, promoting the virtue and advancing the happiness of man.” However, based on research thus far as available to me at the institute, Jefferson makes little reference to religion fostering virtue.

The First Amendment defines religious liberty through the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause. Both Washington and Jefferson refer to the protections of the Free Exercise Clause, “Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise thereof” in letters.

Washington addresses free exercise in correspondence to various religious congregations throughout the United States. With Washington’s unanimous election, leaders of minority congregations, Baptists, Roman Catholics and Jews, wrote to Washington to congratulate him and voice their concerns over freedom of worship.

Moses Seixas, warden of Newport, Rhode Island’s Touro Synagogue wrote to Washington:

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People — a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance — but generously

affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: — deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine: — This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual confidence and Public Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.

Seixas refers to the ‘deprived...invaluable rights of free citizens’ and offers thanksgiving for a government that will protect all creeds.

In his reply, Washington states:

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent national gifts. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

Washington echoes Seixas’ language with the repetition of “bigotry no sanction, persecution no assistance...” Additionally, Washington clearly states that the citizenry of the United States all possess freedom of conscience. This idea is echoed in Washington’s letter to a Roman Catholic parish in New York. Washington writes, “As mankind become more liberal, they will be more apt to allow that all those, who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community, are equally entitled to the protection of civil government.” In a response to the Baptist congregations of Virginia, Washington makes a decisive statement concerning religious liberties and free exercise. Washington writes:

If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed in the Convention, where I had the honor to preside, might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution. For you, doubtless, remember that I have often expressed my sentiment, that every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience...

Again, Washington repeats the idea that a ‘good citizen’ deserves the full protection of free exercise. As these examples demonstrate, Washington was setting the precedent that religious freedom extends to all creeds, provided they are “good citizens.”

Through his Farewell address and various examples of presidential correspondence, Washington states decisively his support of free exercise protections. Jefferson also addresses the issue of free exercise. In December of 1801, Thomas Jefferson drafted a letter in response to the correspondence from the Danbury Baptist Association. The Danbury Baptists wrote to Jefferson in October of 1801 concerning their religious liberty in their home state of Connecticut. The state legislature of Connecticut sanctioned the Congregationalist faith as the official state religion. The Baptists were a minority and practiced their faith with permission of the Congregationalist establishment. In their letter to Jefferson, the Danbury Baptists stated their concern for religious liberty as a protected, inalienable right. The letter reads:

That the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbour: But Sir, our constitution of government is not specific. Our antient charter, together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted as the Basis of our government, At the time of our revolution; and such had been our Laws & usages, & such still are; that Religion is consider,d as the first object of Legislation; & therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expence of such degrading acknowledgements, as are inconsistent with the rights of fre[e]men

Jefferson drafted a response and sent copies to two members of his cabinet, Attorney General Levi Lincoln and Postmaster General Gideon Granger. Jefferson sought advice as he expected attacks from Federalist ministers in New England and knew his response to the Baptist congregation would be published. Therefore, he asked Granger and Lincoln, both from New England, to vet the draft. Jefferson made changes to the draft and posted the letter to the Danbury Baptist Association on January 1, 1802. Like

Washington's responses to minority congregations, Jefferson's letter is a clear statement on Free Exercise.

Jefferson writes:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & 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 & State. ...

The Danbury letter, while a statement of support for religious toleration, is seen as controversial because of Jefferson's inclusion of the phrase, "a wall of separation between Church and State." This wall of separation is a marked departure from Washington's stated beliefs of religious freedom. For virtue to be present among the people, religion and morality is needed. If a barrier exists between organized religion and republican government, then the instilling of virtue will suffer. Jefferson's wall of separation is one example of the diverging statements regarding religious freedom from church establishment. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The issue of establishment is considered vague and has been open to interpretation.

Relative to Washington and Jefferson's views, I would like to consider the role of government funding to religious institutions as an establishment issue. In the colonial period, colonies had official congregations that received tax support for their mission. This could be interpreted as governmental support for the mission of the congregation as instiller of virtue. In 1785, Patrick Henry proposed a bill that would levy a tax to be used in support of instruction of Christianity. George Mason, working against Henry's proposal, sent a remonstrance to Washington for his signature. In a reply to Mason, Washington stated that he did not see a problem with public support. Washington wrote:

Altho, no man's sentiments are more opposed to any kind of restraint upon religious principles than mine are; yet I must confess, that I am not amongst the number of those who are so much alarmed at the thoughts of making people pay towards the support of that which they profess, if of the denomination of Christians; or declare themselves Jews, Mahomitans or otherwise, and thereby obtain proper relief.

While Washington stresses that he is a supporter of religious liberty, he states that he does not find it alarming to tax the people to support the services they consume.

However, Jefferson fought against public support for Churches. Notably, Jefferson's Act for Establishing Religious Freedom outlawed any required support for religious institutions in Virginia. Additionally, it is possible to interpret Jefferson's profession of a wall of separation as a statement against any involvement in religious affairs by government officials.

In conclusion, it is evident that Washington and Jefferson, as representative of the Framers, were not in total agreement over the role of religious liberty and the role of religion in the public sphere. However as evident in their writings, both men stated the importance of protecting religious liberty in the new republic.

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