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About the Freedom of Religion

Philadelphiensis II

Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal*, 28 November 1787

(excerpt)

My Fellow-Citizens, The present time will probably form a new epoch in the annals of America. This important, this awful crisis bids fair to be the theme of our posterity for many generations. We are now publicly summoned to determine whether we and our children are to be *freemen* or *slaves*; whether the liberty, which we have so recently purchased with the blood of thousands of our fellow countrymen, is to terminate in a blessing or a curse.

The establishment of a new government is a matter of such immense magnitude, that any other human transaction is small indeed when compared to it. Great circumspection is therefore necessary on this interesting occasion: the temporal, and in some measure the eternal happiness of millions of souls is involved in this important work: I say even in some measure our eternal happiness is concerned; for, that a good or a bad government naturally influences religion and morality, is a principle indisputably confirmed by fact. Under a free and patriotic government, the bulk of the people will necessarily be virtuous: but under a tyrannical and unjust one, the greater part of the people will as necessarily be wicked: the complexion of the *governing* is ever the colour of the *governed*.

Every freeman possessed of the smallest portion of patriotism and general philanthropy, ought, at this critical juncture, to think seriously, to deliberate coolly, and to determine cautiously. All that is dear to him, nay all that constitutes life itself happy or miserable, is at this very moment about to be unalterably fixed: the rivet of tyranny may now be clenched, that will bind forever the freedom of America in the indissoluble chains of cursed slavery. In the adoption of the new constitution in its present form, we will lose more than all that we have fought for, and gained in a glorious and successful war of seven years; yea, and still more than this, our very character of *citizens* and *freemen* will be changed to that of *subjects* and *slaves*. In this act the bright orb of glorious liberty will go down under the horizon of cruel oppression, never never to illuminate our western hemisphere again! How much better, that she had never cast a ray upon Columbia, than thus to blaze for a moment, and then to vanish forever!

In regard to religious liberty, the cruelty of the new government will probably be felt sooner in Pennsylvania than in any state in the union. The number of religious denominations in this state, who are principled against *fighting* or *bearing arms*, will be greatly distressed indeed. In the new constitution there is no declaration in their favour; but on the contrary, the Congress and President are to have an absolute power over the *standing army, navy, and militia*; and the *president*, or rather *emperor*, is to be commander in chief. Now, I think, that it will appear plain,

that no exemption whatever from militia duty, shall be allowed to any set of men, however conscientiously scrupulous they may be *against bearing arms*. Indeed, from the nature and qualifications of the president, we may justly infer, that such an idea is altogether preposterous: he is by profession a *military man*, and possibly an old soldier; now, such a man, from his natural temper, necessarily despises those who have a conscientious aversion to a military profession, which is probably the very thing in which he principally piques himself. Only men of his own kind will be esteemed by him; his fellow soldier he will conceive to be his true friend, and the only character worthy of his notice and confidence.

Since, in the new constitution no provision is made for securing to these peaceable citizens their religious liberties, it follows then by implication, that no such provision was intended. Their influence in the state of Pennsylvania is fully sufficient to save them from suffering very materially on this account; but in the great vortex of the whole continent, it can have no weight. How can we expect that a special law will be made by the new Congress merely on their account; and yet it will be absolutely necessary that such a law shall be made, before this privilege is secured to them? Can any man rationally suppose that the president will give his assent to a law in favor of the men whom he heartily despises; a law also, that in its operation must curtail his own *dignity* and *splendor*, by reducing the number of his military? No certainly. There is not probably a military man on earth that could bear the thought. So that such a supposition is absurd. The friends of this scheme of government may possibly attempt to say, that this religious liberty is sufficiently secured by the constitution of the state. But I say not; for, this is a case in which the United States are a party, and every case of this kind, according to the new plan, must be determined by the *supreme law of the land*; that is, by the Congress and president, who are to have the sole direction of the militia. This will be a matter then, in which a particular state can have no concern.

From the proceedings of the convention, respecting *liberty of conscience*, foreign politicians might be led to draw a strange conclusion, *viz.* that the majority of that assembly were either men of *no* religion, or all of *one* religion; such a conclusion naturally follows their silence on that subject; they must either have been indifferent about religion, or determined to compel the whole continent to conform to their own. For my own part, I really think, that their conduct in this instance is inexplicable: it is impossible to divine what might have been their intentions. . . .

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