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About the Freedom of Religion

Manasseh Cutler: Sermon

Marietta, Northwest Territory, 24 August 1788 (excerpt)

. . . The sun, the glorious luminary of the day, comes forth from his chambers of the East, and, rejoicing to run his course, carries light and heat and joy through the nations to the remotest parts of the West, and returns to the place from whence he came. In like manner divine truth, useful knowledge, and improvements appear to proceed in the same direction, until the bright day of science, virtue, pure religion, and free government, shall pervade this western hemisphere. The inspired writers, we have already seen, delight to speak of the propagation of Christianity, under this figure, as proceeding from the rising to the setting sun until incense shall be offered to the true God in every place. The Divine counsels, opened to us by the events of time, give us just ground to believe that one great end God had in view in the original discovery of this American Continent, and in baffling all the attempts which European Princes have made to subject it to their dominion, and in giving us the quiet possession of it as our own land, was that a new Empire should be called into being—an Empire new, indeed, in point of existence, but more essentially so, as its government is founded on principles of equal liberty and justice. Never before was the wisdom of an Empire collected in *one*^(a) august assembly, for the purpose of deliberating, reasoning, and deciding on the best mode of civil government. Never before had a people an opportunity of adopting and carrying into effect, a constitution of government for an extensive consolidated body, which was the result of inferences from the experience of past ages and sober reasoning on the rights and advantages of civil society. It may be emphatically said that a new Empire has sprung into existence, and that there is a new thing under the sun.

By the Constitution now established in the United States, religious as well as civil liberty is secured. Full toleration is granted for free inquiry, and the exercise of the rights of conscience. No one kind of religion, or sect of religion, is established as the national religion, nor made, by national laws, the test of truth. Some serious Christians may possibly tremble for the Ark, and think the Christian religion in danger when divested of the patronage of civil power. They may fear inroads from licentiousness and infidelity, on the one hand, and from sectaries and party divisions on the other. But we may dismiss our fears, when we consider that truth can never be in real hazard, where there is a sufficiency of light and knowledge, and full liberty to vindicate it. . . .

(a) The Convention which met in 1787 and formed the Constitution of the United States.

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