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Samuel Johnston Speech: North Carolina Hillsborough Convention, 30 July 1788

Governor *Johnston* expressed great astonishment that the people were alarmed on the subject of religion. This, he said, must have arisen from the great pains which had been taken to prejudice men[']s minds against the Constitution. He begged leave to add the following few observations to what had been so ably said by the gentleman last up [James Iredell].

I read the Constitution over and over, but could not see one cause of apprehension or jealousy on this subject. When I heard there were apprehensions that the Pope of Rome could be the President of the United States, I was greatly astonished. It might as well be said that the King of England or France, or the Grand Turk could be chosen to that office. It would have been as good an argument. It appears to me that it would have been dangerous, if Congress could intermeddle with the subject of religion. True religion is derived from a much higher source than human laws. When any attempt is made by any government to restrain men[']s consciences, no good consequence can possibly follow. It is apprehended that Jews, Mahometans, Pagans, &c. may be elected to high offices under the government of the United States. Those who are Mahometans, or any others, who are not professors of the Christian religion, can never be elected to the office of President or other high office but in one of two cases. First, if the people of America lay aside the Christian religion altogether, it may happen. Should this unfortunately take place, the people will chuse such men as think as they do themselves. Another case is, if any persons of such a description, should, notwithstanding their religion, acquire the confidence and esteem of the people of America by their good conduct and practice of virtue, they may be chosen. I leave it to gentlemen[']s candour to judge what probability there is of the people's chusing men of different sentiments from themselves.

But great apprehensions have been raised as to the influence of the eastern states. When you attend to circumstances, this will have no weight. I know but two or three states where there is the least chance of establishing any particular religion. The people of Massachusetts and Connecticut are mostly Presbyterians.¹ In every other state, the people are divided into a great number of sects. In Rhode-Island the tenets of the Baptists I believe prevail. In New-York they are divided very much: the most numerous are the Episcopalians and the Baptists. In New-Jersey they are as much divided as we are. In Pennsylvania, if any sect prevails more than another it is that of the Quakers. In Maryland the Episcopalians are most numerous, though there are other sects. In Virginia there are many sects; you all know what their religious sentiments are. So in all the southern states they differ; as also in New-Hampshire. I hope therefore that gentlemen will see there is no cause of fear that any one religion shall be exclusively established.

1. Massachusetts and Connecticut were Congregational in church polity. These two states maintained their religious establishments longer than any of the other original thirteen states. Connecticut disestablished its state church in 1818. Massachusetts followed suit in 1833.

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