George Washington and Religious Liberty

View PDF



This is an excerpt of a sermon delivered by Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, February 20, 1932. The full text is included in the volume "Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings," ed. Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel, Union of Sephardic Congregations, 1980, pp. 63-71

In Washington's days, religious liberty as we now know it was not a well understood, conventional policy. It was a daring revolutionary departure from the universally accepted order. In all Europe, and throughout the New World also, there were established state churches. In this land, too, notwithstanding the pioneer efforts of Roger Williams, Jefferson, Madison and Washington, many of the clergy belonging to the faith of the majority were zealous in endeavoring to see their Church constitutionally recognized as that of the established official religion of the new United States. To their sincere piety, the state should naturally be, as it was everywhere else, the ally of the universal claims and missionary spirit of the Church. Had not that tradition been set up in this land by the Pilgrim Fathers when they established here not so much a state as a church polity expressing itself through the forms of a state?

The results of that union of Church and State are all too well known. Those very Pilgrim Fathers who had sought these shores as a refuge from the intolerant discriminations exercised by a dominant majority Church in the Old World, in their turn here exercised the same discriminations against those whom they regarded as dissenters.

Against this danger, George Washington took a firm, determined and consistent stand. Churchman though he was, he could not understand a concept of national liberty which gave physical freedom without spiritual freedom. He declared: "The cause of American liberty is the cause of every virtuous American citizen,

whatever be his religion or descent.” In the eyes of George Washington, this complete spiritual as well as civic liberty had to be not a grudged or a gracious concession, but a right. It was not to be toleration exercised by a privileged majority, it was to be religious equality.

Again and again he expressed himself in this vein, as when he wrote to the United Baptist Churches: “Every man conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinion ought to be protected in worshiping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.” To the New Baptist Church in Baltimore, he wrote: “In this enlightened age and in this land of equal liberty, it is our boast that a man’s religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the laws nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States.”

In Washington’s letter to the Jewish Congregation in Newport, he wrote: “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, 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.”

Washington himself took more than one occasion to give public and eloquent demonstration of his own utter freedom from religious prejudice, and his convictions that in this new America all religions must stand on a footing of equality, as when at his inauguration as first President of the United States the whole clergy of this city, including Gershom Mendes Seixas, the Minister of Shearith Israel at the time, took official part in the parade and epoch making ceremonies. In his letter to the Jewish community of Savannah, Georgia, he expressed his rejoicing that “a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth, and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive.”

Alas that his roseat belief has been so bitterly belied, and that a century and a half after he wrote these noble words the great majority of our brethren of Israel in other lands are cowering or crushed under social segregation, political discrimination, economic boycott, calculated persecution or bloody violence. This great principle of religious liberty for which George Washington stood so strongly, bravely and unflinchingly is not yet fully granted by lesser men with narrower hearts. Eternal vigilance is the price of religious liberty. We must still be on our

guard against those who, without daring openly to advocate an overthrow of the constitution, would yet undermine it by a thousand insinuating ways of giving to our government, our public schools and all our institutions a sectarian character in the pattern of a dominant Church. We must still exercise unwearying vigilance against the hydra-headed monster of bigotry.

Truly, America’s enemies today are within her own borders. We do not need a George Washington to lead us against a foe from other lands. Today we need a George Washington to preserve our America from disrupting intolerance within our own borders, whether it be the intolerance of religion or the intolerance of irreligion. Among America’s enemies today are those who flaunt that constitutional civic liberty and liberty of conscience which we recall today as among the most precious gifts bequeathed to this country by George Washington.

Let us pray in the very words of Washington: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”