

The Correspondence of George Washington Regarding Freedom of Religion

US Constitution, Article VI, ratified June 21, 1788: The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several state legislatures, and all executive and judicial officers, both of the United States and of the several states, shall be bound by oath or affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.

1) Address of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, signed on behalf of the church by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, May, 1789.

We the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, humbly beg leave in the name of our Society collectively in these United States, to express to you the warm feelings of our hearts, and our sincere congratulations on your appointment to the Presidentship of these States. We are conscious from the signal proofs you have already given that you are a friend of mankind; and under this established idea, place as full a confidence in your wisdom and integrity, for the preservation of those civil and religious liberties which have been transmitted to us by the providence of GOD and the glorious revolution, as we believe ought to be reposed in man. And hence we enjoy a holy expectation that you always will prove a faithful and impartial Patron of genuine, vital religion—the grand end of our creation and present probationary existence.

To the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 29 May 1789

It shall still be my endeavor to manifest, by overt acts, the purity of my inclinations for promoting the happiness of mankind, as well as the sincerity of my desires to contribute whatever may be in my power towards the preservation of the civil and religious liberties of the American People. In pursuing this line of conduct, I hope, by the assistance of divine providence, not altogether to disappoint the confidence which you have been pleased to repose in me. After mentioning that I trust the people of every denomination, who demean themselves as good citizens, will have occasion to be convinced that I shall always strive to prove a faithful and impartial Patron of genuine, vital religion: I must assure you in particular that I take in the kindest part the promise you make of presenting your prayers at the Throne of Grace for me, and that I likewise implore the divine benedictions on yourselves and your religious community.

2) The Address of the *General Committee* representing the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, assembled in the City of Richmond, May 8th, 9th, 10th 1789

When the constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a Society, had unusual strugglings of mind; fearing that *the liberty of conscience*, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured. Perhaps our jealousies were heightened on account of the usage that we received under the royal government, when Mobs, Bonds, Fines, and Prisons were our frequent attendants. Convinced on one hand that without an effective national government we should fall into disunion and all the consequent evils; and on the other fearing that we should be accessory to some religious oppression, should any one Society in the union preponderate over all the rest: But amidst all the inquietudes of mind, our consolation arose from this consideration ‘The plan must be good for it bears the signature of a tried, trusty friend’—and if religious liberty is rather insecure, ‘The administration will certainly prevent all oppression for a Washington will preside.’

To the United Baptist Churches of Virginia, New York, May, 1789

Gentlemen, 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.

3) From the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, May 30, 1789.

But we derive a presage even more flattering from the piety of your character. Public virtue is the most certain mean of public felicity, and religion is the surest basis of virtue. We therefore esteem it a peculiar happiness to behold in our chief Magistrate, a steady, uniform, avowed friend of the Christian religion, who has commenced his administration in rational and exalted sentiments of Piety, and who in his private conduct adorns the doctrines of the Gospel of Christ, and on the most public and solemn occasions devoutly acknowledges the government of divine Providence.

To the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, New York, May 30, 1789

Gentlemen, While I reiterate the possession of my dependence upon Heaven as the source of all public and private blessings; I will observe that the general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry and œconomy seems, in the ordinary course of human affairs are particularly necessary for advancing and confirming the happiness of our country. While all men within our territories are protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of their consciences; it is rationally to be expected from them in return, that they will be emulous of evincing the sincerity of their profession by the innocence of their lives, and the beneficence of their actions: For no man, who is profligate in his morals, or a bad member of the civil community, can possibly be a true Christian, or a credit to his own religious society.

6) The address from the Protestant Episcopal Church, August 12, 1789

To these considerations, inspiring us with the most pleasing expectations as private citizens, permit us to add that as the Representatives of a numerous and extended Church, we most thankfully rejoice in the election of a civil Ruler, deservedly beloved and eminently distinguished among the friends of genuine religion, who has happily united a tender regard for other churches with an inviolable attachment to his own.”

To the Protestant Episcopal Church, August 19, 1789.

On this occasion it would ill become me to conceal the joy I have felt in perceiving the fraternal affection which appears to increase every day among the friends of genuine religion—It affords edifying prospects indeed to see Christians of different denominations dwell together in more charity, and conduct themselves in respect to each other with a more christian-like spirit than ever they have done in any former age, or in any other nation.

4) The address of the Moravian Church, dated 10 July 1789 from Bethlehem, Pa.

Permit us, at the same time to recommend in a particular manner the Brethren's mission among the Indians in the territory of the United States, which is at present at Petquoting on Lake Erie and in a very dangerous situation, to your kind notice and protection, and to lay before you the ardent wish and anxious desire of seeing the light of the glorious Gospel spread more and more over this country, and great multitudes of poor benighted Heathen brought by it to the saving knowledge of Christ our Saviour, who gave himself a ransom for all, and who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. We fervently pray the Lord to strengthen your health, to support you daily by his divine assistance and to be himself your shield and great reward.

To the Moravian Society for Propagating the Gospel, New York, August 15, 1789

Gentlemen, In proportion as the general Government of the United States shall acquire strength by duration, it is probable they may have it in their power to extend a salutary influence to the Aborigines in the extremities of their Territory. In the meantime, it will be a desirable thing for the protection of the Union to co-operate, as far as the circumstances may conveniently admit, with the disinterested endeavours of your society to civilize and Christianize the Savages of the Wilderness. Under these impressions, I pray Almighty God to have you always in his holy keeping.

George Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation*, New York, October 3, 1789

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor—Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions—to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us—and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

5) The address of the Religious Society called Quakers, Philadelphia, 28 Sept.–3 Oct. 1789

The free Toleration which the Citizens of these States enjoy in the public Worship of the Almighty, agreeable to the Dictates of their Consciences, we esteem among the holiest of Blessings.

To the Society of Quakers, October 13, 1789

Gentlemen, The liberty enjoyed by the People of these States, of worshipping Almighty God agreeable to their Consciences, is not only among the choicest of their *Blessings*, but also of their *Rights*—While men perform their social Duties faithfully, they do all that Society or the State can with propriety demand or expect; and remain responsible only to their Maker for the

Religion or modes of faith which they may prefer or profess. I assure you very explicitly that in my opinion the Conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy & tenderness, and it is my wish and desire that the Laws may always be as extensively accommodated to them, as a due regard to the Protection and essential Interests of the Nation may Justify, and permit.

7) An address of the Presbytery of the Eastward (MA and NH), October 28. 1789

It is with peculiar satisfaction we behold how easily the entire confidence of the People, in the Man who sits at the helm of Government, has eradicated every remaining objection to its form. Among these we never considered the want of *a religious test*, that grand engine of persecution in every tyrant's hand [US Constitution, Article VI]: But we should not have been alone in rejoicing to have seen some Explicit acknowledgement of the *only true God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent* inserted somewhere in the *Magna Charta* of our country.

The catholic spirit breathed in all your public acts supports us in the pleasing assurance that no religious establishments—no exclusive privileges tending to elevate one denomination of Christians to the depression of the rest, shall ever be ratified by the signature of the President during your administration. On the contrary we bless God that your whole deportment bids all denominations confidently to expect to find in you the watchful guardian of their equal liberties—the steady Patron of genuine Christianity—and the bright Exemplar of those peculiar virtues, in which its distinguishing doctrines have their proper effect. Under the nurturing hand of a Ruler of such virtues, and one so deservedly revered by all ranks, we joyfully indulge the hope that virtue and religion will revive and flourish. Our unceasing prayers to the *great Sovereign of all nations*, that your administration may be continued to your country, to restore true virtue, and the religion of *Jesus* to their deserved throne in our land: and to found the liberties of America, both religious and civil, on a basis which no era of futurity shall ever see removed:

To the Presbyterian Ministers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, Portsmouth, N.H., November 2, 1789

Gentlemen, The tribute of thanksgiving which you offer to “the gracious Father of lights” for his inspiration of our public councils with wisdom and firmness to complete the national constitution, is worthy of men, who, devoted to the pious purposes of religion, desire their accomplishment by such means as advance the temporal happiness of their fellow-men—and, here, I am persuaded, you will permit me to observe that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the Magna-Charta of our country.

To the guidance of the ministers of the gospel this important object is, perhaps, more properly committed—It will be your care to instruct the ignorant, and to reclaim the devious—and, in the progress of morality and science, to which our government will give every furtherance, we may confidently expect the advancement of true religion, and the completion of our happiness.

8) Letter of the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah, Georgia, June 14, 1790.

Your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion—unrivetted the fetters of

enthusiasm—enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism. By example you have taught us to endure the ravages of war with manly fortitude, and to enjoy the blessings of peace with reverence to the Deity, and benignity and love to our fellow-creatures.

George Washington to Hebrew Congregation in Savanah, June 14, 1790

I rejoice 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. Happily the people of the United States of America have, in many instances, exhibited examples worthy of imitation—The salutary influence of which will doubtless extend much farther, if gratefully enjoying those blessings of peace which (under favor of Heaven) have been obtained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity, and charity towards their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

9) The address was dated 17 Aug. 1790 and signed by the warden of the Congregation Yeshuat Israel of Newport, Moses Seixas (1744–1809), who greeted Washington and gave him this letter when he visited to celebrate the ratification of the US Constitution by Rhode Island on May 29, 1790

Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits—and to join with our fellow Citizens in welcoming you to New Port.

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, & danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle: and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.

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 Publick 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.

For all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Antient of Days, the great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: and, when like Joshua full of days and full of honour, you are gathered to your

Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790.

Gentlemen, while I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. 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 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, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. 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. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

10) First Amendment to the US Constitution, proposed September 25, 1789, ratified December 15, 1791

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

11) Treaty of Tripoli, signed by Washington, 1796; approved unanimously by the Senate, 1797

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Musselmans (Muslims); and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mohametan (Mohammedan) nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

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