

Tuesday, November 6, 2007

Religious Freedom In West Virginia

In the days of the founding fathers things were much different than today. There were many people in that time who believed that the statement "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars and unto God that which is Gods." meant that political allegiances and religious allegiances should and must be separate matters. It was widely believed at that time that politics was a thing of the world, and it was widely believed that ministers should refrain from politics and other vices and concentrate only on spiritual matters alone. Political discussion was a rowdy affair in that era and commonly done in taverns and pubs. It was commonly thought to be best if the clergy dedicated their pursuits to spiritual matters only at that point in history. In short, in that era, politics was seen as having the potential to corrupt the morality of those involved. People did not want ministers practicing politics for the same reason that they wanted clergy to refrain from gambling and prostitution. At that time politics was seen as being beneath the dignity of a legitimate man of God. At that time it was not permissible to corrupt the affairs of god by contaminating religion with the practice of politics. At that point in history, any minister who preached politics from the pulpit would have been immediately denounced as a charlatan and a fraud and then promptly run out of town. The separation of church and state is merely a byproduct of the prevailing mindset in the era in which this country was founded. There is much to be said for a peaceful religion that keeps itself above political agendas. The Christians of that era demanded a high standard of morality from clergy. Political preachers like Past Robertson and Jesse Jackson would have never lasted more than a week in that era. How does this effect us in West Virginia? West Virginia entered the union in 1863 with the understanding that the citizens of the new state would enjoy all legal rights that they previously enjoyed as citizens of Virginia with the notable exception of slavery. The Virginia Statute for religious freedom was in effect at the time that West Virginia became a state, and is therefore part of our common heritage with Virginia. The author of the statute was none other than Thomas Jefferson. A truncated version of this statute is replicated in Article Three Section Fifteen of the West Virginia State Consttution. If one desires to know the mindset of the founding fathers as it relates to religious freedom, a review of Mr. Jefferson's statute for religious freedom is obligatory reading. The full text of the statute is written verbatim below. Stephanie Heck

VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM [Sec. 1] Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as it was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavouring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor, whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has a natural right; that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them: [Sec. 2] Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish enlarge, or affect their civil

capacities. [Sec. 3] And though we well know that this assembly elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such act shall be an infringement of natural right.

Posted by Huntington West Virginia in West Virginia at 19:34

congratulations on your blog, stephanie.

i just came across it and found the piece by thomas jefferson on religion and politics to be very interesting. i hadn't seen this before and was unaware that it is embedded in our constitution. i guess i should read the wv constitution sometime.

it's my understanding from the jefferson writing that he is addressing the issue of religious freedom, especially freedom from coercion related to religion.

but i don't find comments on the related issue of separation of church and state that is often attributed to him. for example i don't think it is necessarily coercive to have meditation time in public schools or even a voluntary prayer if all spiritual and religious perspectives are included.

wouldn't opting out of the school prayer be similar to vegetarian students opting out of eating hot dogs for lunch at the school cafeteria? i doubt the non-praying students would receive more peer pressure than the vegetarian students.

what do you think?

Anonymous on Jan 8 2008, 12:28

The Citation of the quote "seperation of church and state" is a direct quote from Jefferson's famous letter to the Danbury Baptists. The text of that letter is cited below.

Stephanie Heck

To messers. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson
Jan. 1. 1802.

Anonymous on Jan 8 2008, 12:56