

REFLECTIONS

Baptist contributions to religious liberty

Many of you are well aware of the importance of the Virginia experience — Thomas Jefferson’s famous Statute and James Madison’s magnificent Memorial — in disestablishing the Anglican Church and in providing religious liberty for all; indeed, Virginia’s successes provided the foundation for the American experiment in religious liberty that finds full flower in the First Amendment. Some may not appreciate, however, the important contribution made by Baptists along with Jefferson and Madison and other Founders.

In Colonial Virginia, Baptist preachers (along with other dissenters) were required to obtain a license in order to preach. And if they refused (as most did), they could be horse whipped, fined or forced to cool their heels in one of Virginia’s dank and dingy jails. John “Swearing Jack” Waller (a pre-conversion nickname no doubt) was mercilessly whipped by authorities in Caroline County and spent 113 days in four separate jails. James Ireland was jailed in Culpeper, Va., where he continued to preach through the bars while his hands were blooded by knife-wielding detractors seeking to resist his gesticulations. Elijah Craig was charged with disturbing the peace and jailed in Orange County. (Later he moved to Kentucky where he adopted a more peaceful work of distilling bourbon whiskey.) I could name many more.

Why tell the stories of these courageous preachers? Because their suffering inspired Madison to do something about what he called “that diabolical hell-conceived principle of persecution....” It was the witness of Baptist preachers in the face of horrendous persecution that gave Madison the necessary genes to become the father of our Constitution and oppose religious establishments and the persecution they wrought.

But it wasn’t just their *example*. Baptists also lobbied Madison to go beyond disestablishing the Anglican church to spell-out protection for religious liberty in a Bill of Rights to the Constitution he was siring. John Leland, an itinerant Baptist evangelist preaching in Virginia during that heady decade of the 1780s, played an integral role in convincing Madison of the need for a provision in the Bill of Rights protecting religious freedom. In fact, it is said that Leland and Madison met just outside of Orange, Va., on the Fredericksburg Road and made a bargain that bore fruit in the First Amendment. Leland agreed not to oppose Madison’s bid to be a delegate to the Constitutional convention if Madison would promise to seek specific guarantees for religious liberty. (You can go to that very spot today and visit Leland-Madison park.) Madison came through on his prom-

ise and two years later wrote the first 16 words of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

It is in that tradition of promoting religious liberty and pressuring the powers that be for a robust understanding of those two clauses that the Baptist Joint Committee has labored seven and a half decades in our nation’s capital.

This Baptist, Virginian and American commitment to these twin pillars of our constitutional architecture — no establishment and free exercise — has provided a remarkable degree of religious liberty at least when compared to the rest of the world. The New Year’s Eve bombing of the Coptic church in Egypt and the assassination of Salman Taseer in Pakistan are stark reminders of how blessed we are to resolve our religious differences through dialogue and debate, not with bombs and guns. Still, we are far from perfect and sometimes miss the mark.

We have witnessed a watering down of these protections — by the courts, Congress and culture — riddling them with qualifications and exceptions. Georgetown law professor David Cole penned in *The Washington Post* what he heard as the 112th Congress read the Constitution when members came to the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law abridging the Freedom of Speech, except where citizens desecrate the Flag ...; respecting an establishment of Religion, except to support Christian schools ... and the display of crosses in public places; or abridging the free exercise of Religion, except to block the construction of mosques in sensitive areas as determined by Florida Pastors or Fox News.”

In addition to ensuring that government does not meddle in religion in that constitutional relationship, we need to accept and embrace our religious diversity on the cultural level. It is not just how *government* treats religious liberty; it’s how *we* treat each others’ religion. Ours is not a Christian nation, as some contend, but made up of many faiths, including now 17 percent who embrace no faith at all. Our plush pluralism is something to be celebrated, not something to be feared. And our biggest challenge today may be how we view Islam and treat our Muslim friends.

It is my hope and prayer that we — in the tradition of Jefferson and Madison, as well as Leland and Waller, and in partnership with the Baptist Joint Committee — will lead out to fight for religious freedom for everyone unaided and unimpeded by any government authority and to learn to treat our fellow citizens as we would want them to treat us.



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

This column is adapted from Walker’s speech upon receiving the Virginia First Freedom Award (see page 7).