

Freedom Of Faith

By Unknown

In America we are proud of the fact that the Church is separate from the State, and justly so! Our freedom of faith is our most precious heritage, a thing of priceless worth. Too often we take it for granted, forgetting what it cost and to whom we are indebted for it. The right of each man to worship God in the way his heart loves best is so in keeping with the idea and spirit of Masonry, so much a part of its genius, that we need to celebrate it anew in the 150th year of our National Life. If for no other reason, because both directly and indirectly, our Craft had much to do with it becoming a part of our Constitution.

Our fathers founded our Republic upon a new basis, reversing the whole history of mankind. Before that time a country without its National Church with its Official Creed, was quite unknown. But America broke new ground, made a new adventure which must be recognized, by far, the most important since the Reformation, and even more far-reaching. Such a thing was not done without difficulty.

Even in Colonial Times, Church and State were one. In New England the ideal was theocracy, a Church which included the State. In the South, if the State included the Church, they were none the less united. Religious liberty was almost unknown, except by those who defied the law and endured the persecution to enjoy it.

Few realize that prior to the Revolution it was against the law not to go to Church. It was a crime not to Baptize a child in the established Church. It was a crime to bring a Quaker into the colony, and there was a law on the statute books – though, happily not enforced – that permitted the burning of heretics. Witches had been burned in New England; Quakers had been hung. Everybody was required to pay tithes to maintain the Church, and that regardless of their religious affiliations. Those who failed to do so were thrown into prison.

Smarting under these infringements on religious liberty, Jefferson led, and Madison followed, in the fierce struggle to separate Church and State. To Jefferson, more than to any other man, we owe our liberty of faith today. The famous law which first forbade any religious tests for public office was written by Jefferson, and its principles were embodied in the first amendment to the National Constitution. The heart of that stature, couched in noble language, is as follows:

"We, the General Assembly of Virginia, do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall he be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, or shall he otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or beliefs; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by arguments, to maintain their opinions in matters of religion; and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or effect their civic capacities."

What seems a natural and inalienable right of man to us today, was a daring demand in those days. It is a curious fact that while Jefferson did not differ widely in his religious views from Franklin, Adams and even Washington; he was singled out for the most savage attacks for his part in writing the above law, and pressing for its passage in Virginia – and later, in the Nation. Throughout his life he was a target of bitter abuse, nor did it cease after his death. Even the casual reader of the newspapers and pamphlets of that day knows how Jefferson was lampooned for his fight for liberty of faith. He was called a "Skeptic," an "Infidel," an "Atheist" – names which had terrifying meanings in those days – all because he demanded that each man have the right to hold such religious faith as seemed to him right and true and good. So much our liberty of faith cost; against such odds the spirit of tolerance had to make its way.

The writings of Jefferson abound in allusions to his religious views, which he made no effort to conceal. They also show his familiarity with the Bible, in which he surpassed any leading man of his time, not excepting Franklin who was a student of it. The ethics of Jesus fascinated him. During his first term in the White house he found time to make a syllabus of the teachings of Jesus compared with the moral codes of other religions, in which he made a strong case for the superiority of the ethics of Jesus. In 1816 he wrote to his friend Thompson of what he had been doing:

"I have mad a wee little book, which I call the Philosophy of Jesus. It is paradigm of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time and subject. A more beautiful; and precious morsel of ethics I have never seen. It is a document in proof that I am a real Christian, that is, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus."

Yet this was the man denounced as an "Atheist," and held up to scorn as enemy of God and man, because he held that others had a right to disagree with him and yet enjoy the honors of citizenship. No wonder he wrote his confession of faith in the word: "I have sworn upon the Altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Ignorance and intolerance were the two enemies which he fought all his days, without truce.

From Paris he wrote to George Wythe in 1786: "Preach, my dear sir, a crusade against ignorance, establish and improve the law for educating the people." To that end he himself had founded the University of Virginia, in which there were no religious tests for professors or pupils. Students of theology were invited to attend and enjoy the lectures and the library. As he

said: "By bringing the sects together and mixing them with the mass of other students we shall soften their aspirates. liberalize and neutralize their prejudices and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason and sanity."

In his own life Jefferson was brought up in a Church, and was a fairly regular attendant on its services. As an Architect he planned at least one church, and gave freely to the erection of others and to the support of public worship. A lover of the Bible, he gave freely to Bible Societies. No one ever heard him use an oath, and his magnanimity was such that he placed a marble bust of his political antagonist. Hamilton, in the hall of Monticello. Such was the man who, dying murmured with his last breath, as he sank into sleep the old, beautiful Bible Prayer: "Now Lettest Thy Servant Depart In Peace."

While it has not been shown that Jefferson was a Mason, as was at one time thought, all Masons will honor in the Lodge, and in their hearts, the man to whom, more than to any other of the men who laid the foundation of our Republic, we are indebted for the religious freedom – that is, for the glory of a free Church in a free country. For it was as much an emancipation for the Church as for the State, and it has been an unmixed blessing to both.

To have written the Declaration of Political Independence was a great honor, but not a few will think it an even greater honor to have led in the achievement of religious independence. It closed a long and bloody chapter of history; it marked a new era, second only to that of the advent of Christ among men.

As has been said, Masonry had much to do with it, directly and indirectly. Directly in that the leaders with whom Jefferson worked and without whom he would have failed were, most of them, Masons. And indirectly by virtue of the fact that Masonry does its greatest work, not by laws and edicts, but by its teachings and influence. If any one will read the Virginia Statue on religious liberty, and the first amendment of the Constitution, along side the article on God and Religion in the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of England in 1732, he will discover that the spirit and purpose of all three documents are the same. The Masonic Constitution, written more than fifty years earlier, was one of the ancestors of the other statements.

Thus by our history, no less than by our Constitution and genius, Masons are pledged to keep Church and State separated, and to watch vigilantly every insidious effort to unite the two. Such efforts are always afoot, disguised in all sorts of ways, but we ought to be able to detect the wolf even when it wears the white rode of a lamb. It asks for clear thinking and tireless vigil, but Masons will not fall asleep and let the work of our fathers be undone.

Just now the whole set of the old world is against the spirit and ideals of our Republic. Dictators strut to and for, declaring themselves supermen born to rule their fellows. Heretofore the loss of political liberty has always been followed by a loss of religious freedom. The two go together, as our fathers joined them; and what God hath joined man must not put asunder.

STB - August 1926