

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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This selection and the next provide important examples of President Washington's thoughts on the important subject of religion, politics, and national well-being. Developing our unique blend of religion and politics, the American Republic self-consciously pioneered a novel approach to the problems of religious zealotry and religious conflict that have long plagued—and still plague—other nations. The United States has no established national church and the Constitution proscribes any religious test for holding national office. But this “separation” of church and state, far from being indifferent to the religiosity of the people, was intended to support liberty of conscience and freedom of worship, privileges until then rare among the nations of the world—and today still precarious in many regimes. President Washington offered an early, generous expression of the principle of religious freedom even before the adoption of the Bill of Rights (1791) in this Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island (1790). Washington in fact wrote many similar letters to other denominations in response to their letters of congratulation upon his election as the nation's first president. The array of these letters illustrates early on the nation's vibrant and peaceful religious pluralism.

Nonetheless, many questions remain. Does vigorous religious pluralism enhance or diminish national identity and civic attachment? Are there limits to religious toleration? Are there religious sects or beliefs that put in doubt the beautiful image of each sitting “in safety under his own vine and fig-tree”? Is liberty of conscience, coupled with disestablishment, a sufficient solution to the problem of fanaticism in politics? Where religious and civic duties conflict, which should take precedence? Is the idea behind religious pluralism also indifferent to the distinction between religion and irreligion—that is, to atheism? What difference would it make if it were?

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

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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.

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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 every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, 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.

August 18, 1790