

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

unwilling even to debate the momentous question of slavery versus freedom. *Votes and Proceedings, September 13-October 7, 1780* (Trenton, 1780), p. 262; *Ibid.*, *November 4-November 10, 1780*, pp. 20-21; *Ibid.*, *November 11-November 17, 1780*, p. 27.

11 The Reverend John Witherspoon on the Relationship Between Religion and Civil Society

[*Works of John Witherspoon*, 5:264-70.]

The revolutionary war had a deleterious effect upon the state of religion in New Jersey. Rival armies destroyed or severely damaged many churches by utilizing the commodious structures as hospitals, stables, or barracks. Clerics and communicants alike neglected or abandoned theological activities to attend to the more immediate problems of the world. And the righteous, crusade-like atmosphere that prevailed in 1775-1776, along with the so-called "Puritan ethic" that had steeled the citizenry for the austerity and self-sacrifice of the pre-revolutionary protest movement, gave way during the war to a general moral laxity marked by corruption, extravagance, acquisitiveness, and debauchery. After the war the churches were rebuilt and the spirit of religion once again moved men. But the postwar religious revival was as much political as it was spiritual. Whatever their sectarian differences, Jerseymen shared the belief that morality and virtue were essential in a republican society. To men like the Reverend John Witherspoon, the church was the institution best able to counter the current licentiousness and promote the kind of conduct and thinking that would lead to the salvation of the experiment in independence and self-government. In a thanksgiving sermon occasioned by the signing of the Treaty of Paris ending the war, the Presbyterian clergyman and college president eloquently described the secular function of religion in the new republic.

[April 1783]

... it is our duty to testify our gratitude to God, by usefulness in our several stations; or in other words, by a concern for the glory of God, the public interest of religion, and the good of others. This is the duty of every person, even of the lowest station, at all times. Even the meanest and most unconnected hath still some small bounds within which his influence and example may be useful. But it is especially the duty of those who are distinguished from others by their talents, by their station, or by office and authority. I shall at present consider it chiefly as the duty of two sorts of persons, ministers and magistrates, those who have the direction of religious societies, and those who are vested with civil authority. As to the first of these, they

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

are under the strongest obligations to holiness and usefulness in their own lives, and diligence in doing good to others. The world expects it from them, and demands it of them. . . . I hope none here will deny, that the manners of the people in general are of the utmost moment to the stability of any civil society. When the body of a people are altogether corrupt in their manners, the government is ripe for dissolution. Good laws may hold the rotten bark some longer together, but in a little time all laws must give way to the tide of popular opinion, and be laid prostrate under universal practice. Hence it clearly follows, that the teachers and rulers of every religious denomination are bound mutually to each other, and to the whole society, to watch over the manners of their several members.

Those who are vested with civil authority ought also, with much care, to promote religion and good morals among all under their government. If we give credit to the holy Scriptures, he that ruleth must be just, ruling in the fear of God. It is a truth of no little importance to us in our present situation, not only that the manners of a people are of consequence to the stability of every civil society, but that they are of much more consequence to free states, than to those of a different kind. In many of these last, a principle of honour, and the subordination of ranks, with the vigour of despotic authority, supply the place of virtue, by restraining irregularities and producing public order. But in free states, where the body of the people have the supreme power properly in their own hands, and must be ultimately resorted to on all great matters, if there be a general corruption of manners, there can be nothing but confusion. So true is this, that civil liberty cannot be long preserved without virtue. A monarchy may subsist for ages, and be better or worse under a good or bad prince; but a republic once equally poised, must either preserve its virtue or lose its liberty, and by some tumultuous revolution, either return to its first principles, or assume a more unhappy form.

From this results a double duty, that of the people themselves, who have the appointment of rulers, and that of their representatives, who are intrusted with the exercise of this delegated authority. Those who wish well to the State, ought to chuse to places of trust, men of inward principle, justified by exemplary conversation. Is it reasonable to expect wisdom from the ignorant, fidelity from the profligate, assiduity and application to public business from men of a dissipated life? Is it reasonable to commit the management of public revenue, to one who hath wasted his own patrimony? Those, therefore, who pay no regard to religion and sobriety in the persons whom they send to the legislature of any state, are guilty of the greatest absurdity, and will soon pay dear for their folly. Let a man's zeal, profession, or even principles as to political measures, be what they will, if he is without personal integrity and private virtue as a man, he is not to be trusted. I think we have had some instances of men who have roared for liberty in taverns, and were most noisy in public meetings, who yet have turned traitors in a little time. Suffer me on this subject to make another remark. I have not yet heard of any Christian State in which there were not laws against immorality. But with what judgment will they be made, or with what vigour will they be executed, by those who are profane and immoral in their own practice? Let me suppose a magistrate on the bench of justice administering an oath to a witness, or passing sentence of death on a criminal, and putting him in mind of a judgment to come: With what propriety, dignity, or force, can any of these be done by one who is known to be a blasphemer or an infidel, by whom in his convivial hours every thing that is serious and sacred is treated with scorn?

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

But if the people in general ought to have regard to the moral character of those whom they invest with authority, either in the legislative, executive, or judicial branches, such as are so promoted may perceive what is, and will be expected from them. They are under the strongest obligations to do their utmost to promote religion, sobriety, industry, and every social virtue, among those who are committed to their care. If you ask me, what are the means which civil rulers are bound to use for attaining these ends, further than the impartial support and faithful guardianship of the rights of conscience? I answer that example itself is none of the least. Those who are in high station and authority, are exposed to continual observation, and therefore their example is both better seen, and hath greater influence than that of persons of inferior rank. I hope it will be no offence in speaking to a Christian assembly, if I say that reverence for the name of God, a punctual attendance on the public and private duties of religion, as well as sobriety and purity of conversation, are especially incumbent on those who are honoured with places of power and trust.

But I cannot content myself with this. It is certainly the official duty of magistrates to be "a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well." That society will suffer greatly, in which there is no care taken to restrain open vice by exemplary punishment. It is often to be remarked, in some of the corrupt governments of Europe, that whatever strictness may be used, or even impartiality in rendering justice between man and man, yet there is a total and absolute relaxation as to what is chiefly and immediately a contempt of God. Perhaps a small trespass of a poor man on property, shall be pursued by a vindictive party, or punished by a tyrannical judge with the utmost severity, when all the laws against swearing, Sabbath breaking, lewdness, drunkenness and riot, shall be a dead letter, and more trampled upon by the judges themselves, than by the people who are to be judged. Those magistrates who would have their authority both respected and useful, should begin at the source, and reform or restrain that impiety towards God, which is the true and proper cause of every disorder among men. O the short-sightedness of human wisdom, to hope to prevent the effect, and yet nourish the cause! Whence come dishonesty and petty thefts? I say, from idleness, Sabbath-breaking, and uninstructed families. Whence come deceits of greater magnitude, and debts unpaid? from sloth, luxury, and extravagance. Whence come violence, hatred and strife? from drunkenness, rioting, lewdness, and blasphemy. It is common to say of a dissolute liver, that he does harm to none but himself; than which I think there is not a greater falsehood that ever obtained credit in a deceived world. Drunkards, swearers, profane and lascivious jesters, and the whole tribe of those who do harm to none but themselves, are the pests of society, the corrupters of the youth, and, in my opinion, for the risk of infection, thieves and robbers are less dangerous companions.

Upon the whole, my brethren, after we have contended in arms for liberty from foreign domination, let us guard against using our liberty as a cloke for licentiousness, and thus poisoning the blessing after we have attained it. Let us endeavour to bring into, and keep in credit and reputation, every thing that may serve to give vigour to an equal republican constitution. Let us cherish a love of piety, order, industry, frugality. Let us check every disposition to luxury, effeminacy, and the pleasures of a dissipated life. Let us in public measures put honour upon modesty and self-denial, which is the index of real merit. And in our families let us do the best by religious instruction, to sow the seeds which may bear fruit in the next generation. We are one of the body of confederated States. For many reasons I shall

avoid making any comparisons at present, but may venture to predict, that whatsoever State among us shall continue to make piety and virtue the standard of public honour, will enjoy the greatest inward peace, the greatest national happiness, and in every outward conflict will discover the greatest constitutional strength.

12 Governor William Livingston on the Republican Challenge

[*Votes and Proceedings, May 15-June 19, 1783* (Trenton, 1783). pp. 94-95.]

The War for Independence was not the American Revolution. As the fighting stopped and peace returned to the state, thoughtful Jersey men took stock of what had been achieved and what lay ahead. They realized that theirs was a bold, even audacious, undertaking. Never before had man attempted to establish a democratic republic based upon popular sovereignty. After a long and bloody war, independence had been achieved; only time would tell if the experiment in republicanism would be transitory or permanent. Many serious problems faced the new nation and its member states. But its ultimate fate would depend upon the ability of the people to measure up to the republican ideal of civic virtue. In the brief message to the General Assembly reprinted below, Governor William Livingston warned the solons of the public faith that must be observed if the prophecy of self-government was to become a reality.

Burlington, May 19, 1783

Gentlemen,

Providence having been pleased to terminate the late War in a Manner so honourable and advantageous to America, I most heartily congratulate you on the auspicious Event; but let us not flatter ourselves that because the War is over, our Difficulties are at an End. The Advantages to be expected from the Establishment of our Independence, will greatly depend upon our publick Measures, and a Conduct suitable to so important a Blessing. Perhaps at no particular Moment during our whole Conflict with Great-Britain has there been a greater Necessity than at the present Juncture of Unanimity, Vigilance and Exertion. The Glory we have acquired in the War will be resounded through the Universe. God forbid that we should ever tarnish its Lustre by an unworthy Conduct in Times of Peace. We have established our Character as a brave People, and exhibited to the World the most incontestible Proofs that we are determined to sacrifice both Life and Fortune in Defence of our Liberties. Heaven has crowned our victorious and heroic Struggles with the most signal Success; and our military Exploits have astonished the World. Let us now shew ourselves worthy of the inestimable Blessings of Freedom by an inflexible