

An Expansion of Liberty
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Abstract

This primary source analysis examines the relationship between church and state in early American society from the point of view of the anonymous pamphlet, *The Freeman's Remonstrance Against an Ecclesiastical Establishment, being some remarks On a Late Pamphlet, Entitled The Necessity Of An Established Church In Any State; By A Freeman Of Virginia*, written in 1777. The Freeman uses many ideas from the American Revolution such as American unity, the expansion of liberty, and expansion of equality to argue for disestablishment. This topic is important because of the ever-evolving debate over church and state in the United States.

The American Revolution started out as a revolt against English rule but because of its ideas evolved into a revolt against many aspects of early American society. Potentially, the most radical change to American society was the disestablishment of the official state churches. This change developed gradually through debate and campaigns by distinct groups in early America, but one happened in Virginia during the Revolutionary War, with the evangelical Christians and Enlightened rationalist thinkers working together to oust Virginia's official Anglican Church in favor of no official church.¹ The evangelicals wished for religious freedom to avoid persecution.² The Enlightened rationalists were led by people who believed in liberty of conscience; the idea people should believe what they thought rational.³ The anonymous pamphlet, *The Freeman's Remonstrance Against an Ecclesiastical Establishment*, written in 1777 during the Revolutionary War shows the debate of disestablishment in Virginia and America. *The Freeman's Remonstrance* argues for disestablishment using the revolutionary ideas of unity, liberty, and equality, showing how the American revolution expanded religious liberty in early American society.

¹ Thomas Kidd, "'One God, Three gods, No God, or Twenty Gods': Disestablishing America's State Churches," *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 182.

² Kidd, *God Of Liberty*, 182-183.

³ Kidd, *God Of Liberty*, 168.

The Freeman of Virginia argued for the disestablishment of the church and justified it with the revolutionary idea of American unity to fight the British. Prior to the Revolution, each American colony was independent of each other under the British Empire. This changed when the Americans centralized during the revolution with the Continental Congress and Army. The Freeman the Freeman states, "Unity of sentiment among the members of a Commonwealth, especially in case of foreign invasion, is doubtless the chief barrier of its defense, the only bulwark that can secure it from the hand of violence."⁴ The Freeman connects this general idea to the fact that Virginia is divided by religion, stating, "We are unhappily divided in several respects- In Virginia, we greatly differ about the worship of God."⁵ This division in Virginia and the rest of America is an obvious security problem and to solve this the author suggests the disestablishment of churches in all states, claiming, "w one is by law exalted to dominion above the rest, this lays the foundation of envy, and debate, and emulation, and wrath, and discord, and confusion; if not of war, bloodshed, and slaughter, in the end."⁶ The author means if one church holds dominion over the others, that can cause many issues and civil war. The Freeman takes this idea further by stating, "[the disestablishment of the church] alone can render us invincible; and enable us to maintain our rightful independency forever."⁷ This problem of disunity would thus be solved by the government staying out of religion, and the consequence of not solving this national security and religious issue would be the end of the revolution. Through this logic, The Freeman directly characterizes the disestablishment of church and states with the American Revolution's ideas and success.

⁴ *The Freeman's Remonstrance against an Ecclesiastical Establishment: being some remarks On A Late Pamphlet, Entitled The Necessity Of An Established Church In Any State; By A Freeman Of Virginia.* (Williamsburg: Dixon and Hunter, 1777), 1.

⁵ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 1.

⁶ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 5.

⁷ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 13.

Another fundamental revolutionary idea argued by the Freeman for disestablishment was the expansion of liberty, and it shows what early Americans thought about Americans' religious future. The author shows the idea of liberty by stating, "When every society of Christians is allowed full, equal, and impartial liberty, what can they desire more? What advantage could they expect by a revolution, when everyone enjoys all the privileges he can wish for already? There can be no danger of mens growing uneasy under such an auspicious government."⁸ The author argues that if a society gives full liberty to all Christians, then everyone will be content and there will be no further revolutions. The Freeman of Virginia speaks from experience here because of this idea's resonates with the politics of his day. Virginia and America in general have a remarkably diverse groups of Protestants, and, within that, many malcontent dissenters.⁹ This idea of expanding liberty to all the Protestants by the means of no established church would accommodate all groups. It is interesting that the author mentions the fear of future revolutions due to religious conflict while in an active revolution in 1777. This speaks to the conservative nature of the American Revolution and the difference between the expansion of liberty and total liberty. An expansion of liberty expands liberty and freedoms to some but not all people. Total liberty expands it to all people. The American Revolution changed a lot about American society, the establishment of the church being one example, but it did not cause total social upheaval like other revolutions. Further, "Almost no one in the revolutionary era expected that ending direct government support for religion would also remove faith from the public sphere."¹⁰ The author reinstates this idea: "When every society of Christians."¹¹ The Freeman is not writing to remove Christianity from government, they are writing to expand religious liberty to accommodate the diverse Protestant Chrisitan at the time in America.

⁸ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 5.

⁹ Kidd, *God Of Liberty*, 182.

¹⁰ Kidd, *God Of Liberty*, 169.

¹¹ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 5.

While the *Freeman's Remonstrance* uses the revolutionary idea of liberty to argue for an expansion of religious liberty, the pamphlet also shows the limits to that expansion in early American society with its Anti-Catholic rhetoric. The Freeman shows this when he responds to someone's argument that an established church would stop Catholicism from spreading. As Freeman states, "An ecclesiastical establishment is the only foundation on which the Antichrist synagogue does or can stand. Take away the establishment, and you overturn the whole superstructure. There can be no popery, where there is no established church."¹² This shows several things about early American society. The first being, anti-Catholic rhetoric was widespread with both sides for and against disestablishment, claiming it would benefit their side. Second, that one reason the advocates wished for disestablishment was because they thought it would protect against Catholicism. Thus, the Freeman did not do this because they wished for total religious freedom. The Freeman wanted to simply expand religious freedom to all Protestants who they could tolerate. Nevertheless, the disestablishment movement still expanded religious freedom in early American society because of its revolutionary ideas.

The Freeman of Virginia also used the revolutionary idea of expansion of equality to argue for the disestablishment of the church, which expanded religious freedom in America. One of the main complaints of the American colonists was that they were being treated like slaves by the British Parliament. The Freeman equates slavery to the established church when he states, "America is now threatened with every kind of slavery: is doomed both to civil and religious bondage at once."¹³ The civil being unfair treatment by Parliament, which gets its power from the King of Great Britain. The religious bondage is the established Anglican church, which is headed by the King of Great Britain. Just like all Patriots would agree that they must get rid of Parliament's and the King's direct control over America, they must also get rid of the established

¹² *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 10.

¹³ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 1.

Anglican church too. In doing this, the Patriots are throwing off the metaphorical chains of slavery. Further evidence of the Freeman connecting the revolutionary idea of equality to the need for disestablishment is seen when the Freeman states, “Like the three penny act on tea, though a trifle in itself, it is a badge of slavery. The worst kind of slavery, SPIRITUAL SLAVERY. It is a burden that does not become on the shoulders of freemen. O ye SONS of Liberty!”¹⁴ Here again The Freeman compares the idea of the taxes being imposed upon them as being slavery. Yet, Freeman argues the idea of spiritual slavery by an established church as being even worse than slavery by Parliament. Freeman believes it would be worse because it would taint your immortal soul forever. The solution then is the equality of disestablishment. If all Christians are allowed to worship whatever denomination they wish, there will not be spiritual slavery. Through this belief in the revolutionary idea of expansion of equality, religious freedom is advocated by the Freeman and will be expanded in early American society.

The Freeman's Remonstrance also shows American supporters of an established church viewed the relationship between church and state and how the Freeman in favor of disestablishment refuted them. For most groups, the broader question about official religion was, “whether public virtue required the funding of a state church.”¹⁵ *The Freeman's Remonstrance* shows this debate when the author presents the arguments in favor of an established church to refute them, stating, "Without an established Church, first, the state could not subsist for long. Secondly, the dissenters would persecute one another. And lastly God would be offended for want of temples and altars erected to his honor."¹⁶ The arguments for an official church are that if there is no church the state will not last, there will be chaos by all the dissenters, and that God would be offended by the lack of public virtue. The Freeman's counter arguments are,

¹⁴ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 11.

¹⁵ Kidd, *God Of Liberty*, 185.

¹⁶ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 4.

"Is the state such an adjective that it can't stand by itself? In vain then is our declaration of Independency... There never was, I believe, any Church established by human laws. Either in Pennsylvania or the Jerseys. The inhabitants of their provinces are of several denominations, yet they have stood very firmly to this day."¹⁷

The Freeman argues if the state is not strong enough to exist without the church, then the whole revolution and the reforms of it are pointless. Second, because New Jersey and Pennsylvania never had an established church and have lived in peace and prosperity, that proves the idea of disestablishment true. This debate in *The Freeman's Remonstrance* shows how early Americans who supported the established church viewed the relationship between church and state, and in a larger sense the question over religion was whether early American society needed an official church to maintain virtue.

Through the pamphlet, *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, the arguments for the disestablishment of all churches in America are articulated. These arguments for disestablishment heavily draw upon the revolutionary ideas of American unity, expansion of liberty, and expansion of equality. The Anglican Church was later disestablished in Virginia with the Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. Thomas Jefferson drafted the bill and based it on liberty of conscience. This event was directly tied to the ideas of the America Revolution and the support of groups like the *Freeman's Remonstrance*. The United States federal government would also never have an official established church, which was a radical departure from the norms of history. However, statues like the Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786 and the First Amendment of the United States' Constitution did not end the debate about religion in early America society. The religious debate just changed to different topics and gradually expanded religious liberty and became more secular over time.

¹⁷ *The Freeman's Remonstrance*, 4.

Bibliography

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