

ISLAM AS A DANGER TO REPUBLICAN
VIRTUE: BROADENING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY
IN REVOLUTIONARY PENNSYLVANIA

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The debate over religious liberty in the 1776 Pennsylvania State Constitution reflected not only abstract ideals, but also specific ideas about alien religions among the Revolutionary generation. Previous scholarship on early American politico-religious debate has not adequately represented Islam. Historians have studied early American sentiment toward Catholicism, Judaism, and Deism at length, but early American opinions of Islam have not been so scrutinized. This examination of Revolutionary Pennsylvania's discussion of religious liberty places Islam in its proper context, as a part of the larger debate about the role of religion in early American government. Oddly, both sides in the Pennsylvania State Constitutional debate rooted their arguments in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. On one side were the Constitutionalists who, driven by the political philosophies of the Enlightenment which emphasized toleration, found it easier to accept religious difference. From this perspective,

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 76, NO. 3, 2009.
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government should be divorced from all religion and citizens should be allowed complete liberty of conscience. In a world dictated by nature and reason, free inquiry, open debate, and toleration should be the clarions of republican revolution. On the other side were the Anticonstitutionalists who, influenced by Enlightenment views that associated absolutism with Islam, feared that the radical revolutionaries responsible for writing the Pennsylvania state constitution would take religious liberty too far and thereby threaten Pennsylvania's republican government, which they believed should be rooted in a Protestant tradition. The Anticonstitutionalists held that their Christian religion was one of the best guarantors of republican virtue, and were apprehensive that too much liberality in religion could lead to the influence of Islam, along with Catholicism, Judaism, and Deism, which were alien to them. They were not afraid to express these views in the popular press. The Pennsylvania Anticonstitutionalists believed that the influence of Islam, and other religions that differed from Protestant Christianity, would corrupt republican virtue. In response to this threat to virtue, from 1776 to 1790 Anticonstitutionalist Pennsylvania patriots sought to curtail radical Whig attempts at removing Protestant influences from the state constitution.¹

The people of Pennsylvania, like their colonial neighbors, had just declared their independence from Great Britain in 1776. Now they had to take the Enlightenment-inspired ideology of republicanism and put it into practice. Seventeen-seventy-six began a contentious period of constitution making that would create in each state a republican government. To many American revolutionaries, the history of republican experiments in government was grim. All past republics—Greece, Rome, England, and The Netherlands—had been destroyed by either conquest or coup. The failure of republics had followed a distressing, clear pattern: They began as a noble experiment, declaring a commitment to liberty and justice for people oppressed by the pursuit of private privilege. Yet over time this love of liberty intoxicated and corrupted the citizens. People then pursued liberty for their own ends, creating faction and discord. Turmoil and division replaced order and harmony. This anarchy finally caused people to accept a Caesar or a Cromwell who promised to bring order, and instead brought oppressive tyranny. Republics needed liberty, but their survival depended on its careful direction and control. Some American revolutionaries looked to their religion as one means of this direction and control. Religion would promote virtue, which would prevent corruption of the republic. In Revolutionary Pennsylvania, many republican Whigs saw

the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution as an attack on Protestant virtue that would bring the corrupting influence of alien religions. It is within this context of the republican Whig conception of liberty that we need to examine some of the first American discussion of Islam.²

The current historiography concerning early America's contact with Islam centers on the early republic's conflict with the Barbary States. Contemporary historical analysis has not sufficiently illustrated how American Revolutionary debate over religious liberty exhibited the preconceived notions of early Americans about Islam and Islamic peoples. By the time the early American republic had entered into open conflict with the Barbary States in the 1790s and early 1800s, Americans were more than ready to think the worst about them simply because they were Muslims. The Revolutionary discourse on the Enlightenment concept of republican virtue provided Americans with an avenue of expression for, and development of, their opinions about Islam well before the coming of the Barbary Wars. With the help of the European Enlightenment, Americans had made up their minds about Islam before 1790.³

Just as the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment shaped early American conceptions of politics and government, it also colored early American opinions of Islam. From one part of the Enlightenment, early Americans inherited an oppositional understanding of the Muslim world from their European forebears. Europeans saw almost everything that Muslims did as part of a grand contest between Christianity and Islam, between Europeans and Moors, and ultimately between civilization and barbarism. This antagonistic Enlightenment view of Islam was a crucial reason why the Pennsylvania Anticonstitutionalists saw their 1776 State Constitution's broadening of religious liberty as a grave threat. If Christianity was ignored in the constitution, then Islam could threaten republican virtue.⁴

The formation of this antipathetic Enlightenment view of Islam had been long in development. Enlightenment thinker Barthelemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* was published in 1697, and remained the standard European reference work on the Arab world up until the early nineteenth century. The *Bibliothèque* informed such works as Simon Ockley's *History of the Saracens* in 1708, and George Sale's translation of, and discourse on, the Koran in 1734. Sale and Ockley geared their studies toward conveying an understanding of Islam to a less academic readership. These works demonstrated an Enlightenment sense of superiority over the

Muslim world because Europeans perceived that the Arab world was being outstripped and outdated by Western science. These volumes consisted of a loose collection of randomly acquired facts concerning Middle-Eastern history, Biblical imagery, Islamic culture, and place names. These late seventeenth-and-early-eighteenth-century histories of Islam confirmed already accepted prejudices about the Muslim world, and no matter what minute vestiges of the Enlightenment were found in the Muslim world, these volumes never missed the chance to characterize Islam as an outrageous heresy.⁵

Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century there had been a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Arab world. This knowledge was reinforced by a widespread interest in the alien and unusual, and exploited by the developing sciences of ethnology, comparative anatomy, philology, and history. To this knowledge of the Arab world was added a sizeable body of literature produced by novelists, poets, translators, and travelers. This literature said that not only was Islam a threat to republican virtue, but it also endangered other principles of Enlightenment republicanism. Enlightenment writers created a picture of the Muslim world as a sober warning about the dangers of submitting to despotism, of suppressing public opinion, and of the twin evils of tyranny and anarchy.⁶

Furthermore, Enlightenment philosophers often presented Islam as a prime example of religious tyranny. To the Enlightenment mind, Islam did not encourage inquiry into nature through reason, but relied on received doctrine to answer questions. This defied the Enlightenment spirit of progress that had captivated so many Europeans and Americans by the eighteenth century. For example, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon's 1723 *Cato's Letters*, one of the most influential tracts on eighteenth-century American political thought, argued that tyrants like Muhammad prevented the free expression of ideas. "Truth is a capital Crime; and the Pope and Mahomet, the Alcoran and the Mass-book . . . are sufficient to convince and govern all true Catholicks and Musselmen. But *we* live in a Land of Liberty . . ." Free expression brought about common sense in a populace, and such a free populace was less apt to obey their ruler. To the chagrin of Enlightenment philosophers, Muhammad had made it a capital offense to reason freely on the Koran, and subsequent rulers of the Turkish Empire and other Muslim states frowned on printing and other forms of mass communication. To Enlightenment-minded Americans, this made Muslims "barbarous, ignorant, and miserable slaves" to a system that did not bear investigation or reason. Additionally in the

early 1720s Cotton Mather, the Massachusetts Calvinist clergyman, applied the same idea as Trenchard and Gordon and dismissed Islam as both a religion and a scientific tool. Calling Muhammad “the thick-skulled Prophet,” Mather placed “Mahometan Philosophy” beside “modern [Enlightenment] Philosophy,” and found Muslims lacking because they denied the power of nature and reason. By the mid-eighteenth century, these Enlightenment attitudes framed much of the early American perception of Islam.⁷

This inimical Enlightenment view of Islam was present among Americans by the early 1700s, and by the 1760s, Americans were utilizing that view of Islam in their discourse on republican virtue and religion. Arabian history books, written by Enlightenment-minded European scholars, were available in eighteenth-century America and influenced early American opinions of Islam. These Enlightenment sentiments were illustrated in a newspaper piece, printed in 1764. This article started out positively and declared that the ideas of human decency and justice were common to all men. This author specifically mentioned man’s “duties and sacred rites of hospitality” as virtuous qualities. The author then used “Mahometans and even Negroes” as examples, but he still implied a certain “brutal” nature to these people. He wrote, “... even the most brutal among them are capable of feeling the force of reason, and of being influenced by a fear of God (if the Knowledge of the true God could be introduced among them) since even the fear of a false God, when their rage subsided, was not without its good effect.” This author imparted to Americans that Muslims did not believe in the God that spoke in Enlightenment reason’s ear.⁸

Other colonial American authors attacked Islam. One writer of a newspaper essay commented that, “Were it properly considered, I believe it would be found that habits adopted in childhood influence not only our actions, but our opinions too ...” He then went on to use Muslims and Catholics as an example of those who did not possess the habit to listen to Enlightenment reason. “Thus, what is it but habit that binds a Mahometan to the religion of Mahomet, or a Roman Catholic to the flagrant absurdities of that faith, in contradiction often to their better reason, and the benignity of their natures?” To this early American, both of these alien religions—Islam and Catholicism—were absurd and flew in the face of Enlightenment reason. In the 1760s, minority attempts at reconciling Islam with Christianity fell on deaf ears, because the Enlightenment said that Islam ignored sound reason. It was that ignorance of Enlightenment reason that threatened republican virtue.⁹

For many republican Whigs, Islam became a means to tar their opponents by associating their ideas with a religion akin to despotism. When a radical Whig as early as 1768 suggested separating church and state, a more conservative Whig accused the radical of pursuing a fad and supporting Islam. The conservative wrote of the radical, "... ten to one, but before he is a year older, he will submit to circumcision, and turn Mahometan ... he paints the very church that tolerates him, in the most odious colors, that falsehood can invent or malice dictate." To this early American, the radical Whig was a man without principle, tossed about by fads. So much so that he might become a Muslim tomorrow. To many eighteenth-century Americans, Islam equaled tyranny, despotism, and corruption, which were not fads that they wished to follow. In 1776 when radical Whigs wrote the Pennsylvania Constitution, many more moderate Pennsylvanians saw it as a dangerous radical fad.¹⁰

If the moderates attacked complete religious liberty because Enlightenment writers had lambasted Islam as an aide to tyranny, another strain of Enlightenment thought emphasized the need for freedom of religion. This line of Enlightenment ideology supported the radical Whig's confidence in the individual's ability to understand the world through the exercise of reason. True religion was not something handed down by a church, or contained in the Bible but rather was to be found through free rational inquiry. Thus, the best way to safeguard religious freedom was to separate church from state, so that all men would be guaranteed liberty of conscience.¹¹

The new republic would be conceived in an age of reason, and religion was too easily used by self-interested men to suppress rational thought. Tolerant Enlightenment thinkers hoped that religious freedom would take a public division in the body politic, and make it a private matter, thereby removing a potential barrier to the elusive common good. Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, a proponent of religious toleration, said in 1757, "I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristical mark of the true church." To this line of Enlightenment thought, natural rights should extend to practitioners of all religions. Locke spoke to this Enlightenment principle when he wrote about those who were intolerant. "[I]f he be destitute of ... good-will in general towards all mankind, even to those that are not Christians, he is certainly yet short of being a true Christian himself." Further illustrating the inclusion of all religions in Enlightenment toleration, Locke used Islam as an example. Locke encouraged his readers to see the danger of religious intolerance. "And what if in another country, to a Mahometan or a Pagan

prince, the Christian religion seem false and offensive to God, may not the Christians . . . be extirpated there?" To the radical revolutionary, the lack of complete liberty of conscience in an Enlightened republic put all religions in danger.¹²

Among Enlightened thinkers calling for religious liberty, Pennsylvania's radical revolutionaries in 1776 sought to expand the freedom of religion to grant natural rights to all those who practiced according to their conscience. Colonial Pennsylvania had been famous for respecting religious diversity in the law. Although colonial respect for religious diversity only included the numerous Protestant Christian denominations that flocked to early Pennsylvania, the colony had come to epitomize the ideal of religious freedom for the Enlightenment. Many radical republican ideologues who came to political power in 1776 saw religion as a divisive force in society. Because religion was a matter of individual conscience, radical Whigs preferred not to privilege religion in the constitution, which would disenfranchise those who practiced differently. The Constitutionalist argued that, "In order to preserve the sacred rights of Conscience inviolate to the latest ages, and recommend the inhabitants of this land to the merciful favors of DIVINE GOODNESS, all persons, sects, and societies . . . shall for ever enjoy the same rights . . . unchanged . . . by any law or ordinance whatever for or on account of any religious persuasion, profession or practice, which they now enjoy, or have been accustomed to enjoy according to the charter and laws of this colony . . ." The radical Constitutionalist granted rights to all religions no matter what, and went further saying, "no person . . . shall . . . be molested . . . for his or her religious persuasion . . . nor shall any further test or qualification whatever, concerning religious persuasion, profession, or practice . . . be at any time hereafter imposed or required by any law or ordinances whatever." Another radical Whig author, opposed to any form of test on government officials, assumed that everyone shared at least a belief in God. He wrote, "Let all religious sects have equal privileges, and let every man who believes in God to be eligible to any office in government." While a few Constitutionalist admitted the value of Christianity to the republic, many believed there was no reason to discriminate against non-Christians in any way. These radical Whigs thought that if the people held sovereign power to elect state officials, then religious tests were pointless, since most Pennsylvanians were Christians of some sort, and would elect Protestant officials.¹³

Of all the colonies in 1776, Pennsylvania experienced the most complete shift in political power. The Pennsylvania Colonial Assembly, which had been dominated by Quakers, was largely detached from the Revolutionary

movement. It did not truly represent the people as the radical Whigs thought it should. In 1776, members of the elite in the Assembly went into military service, remained neutral, or became loyalists, and their control over Pennsylvania politics weakened; thus Pennsylvania faced the beginning of the Revolution without experienced leaders. Seeing an opportunity, new men, who were all socially outside of the establishment in Pennsylvania, sought through the Revolutionary movement to take the place of the elites. By the summer of 1776 these new men controlled the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention, and wrote the most radical state constitution to come out of the Revolution.¹⁴

Pennsylvania's radical Whigs resented privilege, and with the new constitution, they sought to correct the protection of privilege—including partiality for certain religions—that they believed had corrupted the colonial assembly. Pennsylvania's radical state constitution embraced near-universal male suffrage, while its government consisted of a weak plural executive and a unicameral, annually elected legislature. Also, new laws would be presented to the citizens for approval. The radical Whigs were sure that this style of government would prevent aristocratic and nepotistic rule, both of which corrupted republican egalitarianism.¹⁵

The radical Pennsylvanians who took power from their aristocratic forebears had to reach further down in society to gain support for their movement. The newly empowered radical Whigs used popular rhetoric and broadened suffrage to attract new groups into the political process. The radical Whigs needed the popular support of these previously suppressed groups who were clamoring for a voice in government. The Pennsylvania radicals also resorted to military intimidation and disenfranchisement in order to neutralize their opponents.¹⁶

Once the Pennsylvania radicals publicly released the state constitution in 1776, more conservative Pennsylvanians were appalled at how different it was from the colonial charter. The change was especially apparent where parts of the new constitution affected Protestant religious tradition. "And no further or other religious test [other than a general belief in God] shall ever hereafter be required of any Civil Officer or Magistrate in this State."¹⁷ While the Constitutionists kept a test oath in the Pennsylvania Constitution, they had broadened it by removing any hint of Protestant language. The new test oath only included a statement of general belief in God, which was too watered down for the more conservative Pennsylvanian's taste. As a result of the state constitution's non-traditional nature, many Pennsylvanians viewed

the radical Whigs as inexperienced upstarts who were trying to fix things that were not broken. Radical Whigs discovered that they could not easily convince all Pennsylvanians to accept such a policy of broad religious freedom.¹⁸ Thus the debate began.

Anticonstitutionalist Pennsylvanians mentioned time and again that their greatest fear of removing the Christian requirement was that a Muslim, as well as a Jew or a Catholic, could become a government officer. Anticonstitutionalist Pennsylvanians' used Islam as a warning in their debates about the broadness of religious liberty in republican government. In support of their arguments, radical revolutionaries attempted to educate their audience about the more Enlightened aspects of Islam, while conservative revolutionaries tried to bring out the negative facets of Islam and its history. More often than not, those who were against the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution focused on the blessings that the colonial government had enjoyed because of its acknowledgement of Pennsylvania's Protestant tradition. If the radical Whigs denied that tradition, then they were tampering with the success of not only the State of Pennsylvania, but also the American Revolution.

In the minds of Anticonstitutionalist Pennsylvanians, one tenet of the old government that did not need fixing was the acknowledgement and respect of certain Protestant religious doctrines. The broad definition of religious liberty of the Constitutionals disturbed the Anticonstitutionalists, because without respect for Protestant Christianity, what was left to promote republican virtue? Anticonstitutionalists worried that other religions would take the place of Protestantism, and the Enlightenment had taught them that those alien religions did not mesh with republicanism. Anticonstitutionalists knew that not everyone believed in the same God that they did. They saw language implying a larger universal faith in a deity as a threat not only to their religion, but also to the success of the republic. From their perspective such a broad approach to religious liberty could bring about Muslim leaders, and lead the new nation to the anarchy and despotism that such corruption entailed.

In response to the radical state constitution, Anticonstitutionalists held a meeting and drafted a list of grievances. The October 22, 1776, issue of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* reported on this "meeting of a large and respectable number of the citizens of Philadelphia" who were opposed to the newly drafted state constitution. The Anticonstitutionalists first complained that the state constitutional convention "affirmed and exercised powers with which they were not entrusted by the people." At the top of their list of

thirty-one disputations concerning the state constitution was, “the Christian religion is not treated with proper respect.”¹⁹ The radical Whigs’ ideas of religious freedom threatened the Anticonstitutionalists’ attachment to Pennsylvania’s Protestant religious tradition, which they believed to be one of the greatest boons to republican government. If proper respect for that benefactor was removed from the republican charter, then there was a chance that alien traditions like Islam could corrupt the republic.

The religious beliefs of the Anticonstitutionalists, buttressed by Enlightenment antagonism towards Islam, framed their discussion of republican government’s optimal structure. Governmental acknowledgement of the supremacy of the Protestant religion would prevent the corrupting influence of Islam and other alien religions. A proclamation printed in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* demonstrated how religion shaped the Anticonstitutionalists’ views of republicanism. The proclamation stated that a government based on popular sovereignty could only be supported by “universal knowledge and virtue,” which was best guaranteed through a promotion of education, “true religion, purity of manners, and integrity of life.”²⁰ This proclamation then commanded and enjoined upon the people that “they lead sober, religious and peaceable lives, avoiding all blasphemies, contempt of the holy scriptures, and of the Lord’s day . . . and that they decently and reverently attend the public worship of God, at all times acknowledging with gratitude his merciful interposition in their behalf, devoutly confiding in him, as the God of armies, by whose favor and protection alone they may hope for success, in their present conflict.”²¹ The proclamation ended with an ardent statement of the “necessity of religion, morality, and good order” in order to gain victory over Great Britain.²² Many Pennsylvanians saw their Christian religion as the easiest expedient toward virtue, which was required to create a prosperous republic. When they perceived a threat to their religion from radical Whigs, they fought to keep Protestant religious language in the constitution.

One Anticonstitutionalist, who called himself “The Detector” warned the Constitutionalists, “that the vengeance of heaven might reasonably be expected to be poured down upon them for abetting a system in which the Christian Faith was treated with such disrespect as to omit inserting its most *mysterious* and disputable *credenda* into a test of qualification for civil offices.”²³ The Constitutionalists had forgotten from where governmental authority originated. Before the Revolution, the king derived his sovereignty from God, and the king always publicly acknowledged this fact so as not to anger his divine superior. American revolutionaries had reasoned that the king was only

sovereign as long as the people went along with it. To the Anticonstitutionalist, this did not mean that the origin of that sovereignty—the Protestant Christian God—had changed. To the Anticonstitutionalist, a republican government should acknowledge the divine source of its authority just as a monarchical government should. If Pennsylvania denied that the Protestant God was the source of the blessing of republican government, then that republic was doomed to failure.

As the two sides squared off in this debate over the breadth of religious liberty in Pennsylvania, the Anticonstitutionalist raised the specter of Islam to discredit the Constitutionalist call for the expansion of religious liberty to all. In these references to the Muslim world, we can see the Anticonstitutionalist playing to the Enlightenment-colored prejudice of their audience to protect their beloved religious tradition and to uphold the virtue of the populace. One of the best examples of this discourse was a lengthy mock dialogue that appeared in Pennsylvania newspapers in October and November of 1776. This fake discourse took place between the fictional caricatures “Orator Puff” and “Peter Easy,” who debated the strengths and weaknesses of Pennsylvania’s new constitution.²⁴ Orator Puff was the Constitutionalist, while Peter Easy was the Anticonstitutionalist, and, as their names suggest, by the end of their artificial discussion the radical Pennsylvania Constitution came off as the loser. This entire dialogue was the publisher’s attempt to convince the people of Pennsylvania to remove the radical upstarts from their revolutionary government. The faux conversation portrayed the Constitutionalist Orator Puff as a parvenu, who simply wished to go along with radical fads, while the Anticonstitutionalist Peter Easy, who focused on holding true to Pennsylvania’s storied past in the midst of rebellion, acted as the voice of tradition and reason.

This fabricated exchange of ideas portrayed the Constitutionals as enemies of true religion by having Orator Puff first dismiss fears that religious liberty would challenge Protestantism, then by making Puff a proponent of Deism, and finally showing Puff defending Islam. One of the first issues that worried Peter Easy was the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution’s lack of respect for Protestant Christianity, demonstrated by Orator Puff’s dismissal of the entire issue as unimportant because the Christian background of Pennsylvanians would insure a Christian government. Orator Puff tried to address Peter’s distress by appealing to the reason of the Convention. Puff, the Constitutionalist, said, “Thou knowest that this country is inhabited chiefly by Christians, and that heretofore no person could be a member of

our Assembly, unless he was a Christian ...”²⁵ This statement revealed the Anticonstitutionalist view of the false logic behind the Constitutionalist position, which included the belief that since most Pennsylvanians were Christians anyway, then there was no cause to fear a Muslim taking political office.

As if to contradict Puff’s own assertion of Pennsylvania’s Christian nature, the author of the dialogue went on to show Orator Puff’s anti-Christian allegiance to the alien religion of Deism. Orator Puff called Pennsylvania’s Protestant tradition “not simple enough for a Commonwealth,” and relayed that Pennsylvania’s assemblymen should not be “hopped with that old fashioned Creed of believing in the Three that bear Record in Heaven.”²⁶ The Constitutionalist in this mock dialogue attacked Pennsylvania’s Protestant religious tradition and hoped to replace it. The author then had Puff say, “By the tenth section of the Plan first published, Members were only to declare in these words, ‘I do believe in One the Creator and Governor of the Universe.’”²⁷ According to the author of this mock debate, the upstart Constitutionalist desired to replace Pennsylvania’s Protestant tradition with the fad of Deism. This concern with Deism became explicit later in the debate when the author had Orator Puff suddenly come to a realization that maybe taking the Protestant test out of the Pennsylvania Constitution could lead to trouble. The author had Puff say, “For it is well known, Peter, that those who do not believe the Christian Religion, think the books written against it, are given by divine Inspiration as much as the Scriptures. They can easily reconcile themselves to that acknowledgement [a general belief in God] ... Thus, thou seest Peter, that by the express letter of the proceedings of the Convention, Deism is made the established Religion of Pennsylvania, without a single syllable being mentioned throughout the whole, of the Christian Religion.”²⁸

If this Deism was not bad enough, then the author had Orator Puff speak directly to Pennsylvanians’ fear of alien religions. Puff explained that the state constitution’s seemingly anti-Protestant policy did not sit well with many Pennsylvanians, “But this section caused so much noise, that in the Frame that is now settled, the expression has been a little altered ... which leaves people who do not believe the Christian Religion to put what construction they please on that ‘acknowledgement.’”²⁹ The author suggested that a lack of respect for Christianity in the constitution would ultimately mean that anyone from any religion could twist the radical constitution’s “acknowledgement” to fit their own peculiar version of God.

This eighteenth-century Pennsylvanian revealed a clear trepidation that a Muslim somehow could take public office and corrupt the virtue of all those around him. The faux dialogue had attacked Deism first because it was easier to juxtapose with the radical Whig conception of religious liberty. The author then had Puff reveal how the wily nature of the radical Whigs would lead to the influence of other more sinister alien religions, "but on the contrary, all the art used which our leaders, bold as they are, dared to employ, to throw a slight and contempt upon it [Christianity]; and now, Deists, Jews, Mahometans and Indians by putting their own gloss and equivocation on the foregoing 'acknowledgement,' may hold the first Offices of profit and trust in our free thinking blessed State."³⁰

Although these quotations did not single out Islam as the only threat to the republic, the fact that Islam was listed indicated the negative view the Anticonstitutionalists had of Muslims and the perceived threat toleration of their religion posed. The author finally revealed the real danger of what the Constitutionlists were doing by tampering with the old regulations. The author argued that the Constitutionlists "put the Christian, Jewish, and Mahometan religions with respect to them on the same footing May not this lend people . . . to think with more indifference of the Christian religion than they used to do?"³¹

To the Anticonstitutionalist, lack of respect for Protestant Christianity in the Pennsylvania Constitution meant that Pennsylvania was respecting alien religions like Islam. This idea flew in the face of Pennsylvania's past, and the Anticonstitutionalists believed that it endangered Pennsylvania's future. Anticonstitutionalists could not abide the possibility of a Muslim becoming a Pennsylvania government official. This mock debate illustrated the Anticonstitutionalists' response to perceived attacks on their Protestant religion. The author had Peter Easy reply to Orator Puff's comments with doubt for the Revolution's success. This Anticonstitutionalist author thought that the Revolution's success was in danger because Pennsylvania's leaders seemed to be talking out of both sides of their mouths. It was a contradiction to ask God to grant success in the Revolution while denying his presence in their government. He had Peter say, "Will not the people and especially the clergy be exceedingly alarmed to think in the midst of so dreadful a war, that we have . . . passed such strongly implied Censures of Contempt on our holy Religion, and weakened the securities of it by law established, while, at the same time, we are continually imploring the assistance of Heaven

in supplications and form of that Religion.”³² The Anticonstitutionalist appealed to the people of Pennsylvania through Peter Easy, “Is not this hypocrisy? . . . How can we ask or expect success, while we thus deliberately, in the face of the whole world are undermining the religion graciously delivered to us by Heaven with such amazing circumstances of mercy? I tremble at the thought; I most fervently hope this article will be altered . . .”³³ To deny Protestant agency in government meant that an alien religion like Islam could corrupt that government. If that happened, then the entire Revolutionary experiment was doomed.

The Anticonstitutionalist author of the Peter Easy and Orator Puff dialogue outlined the Anticonstitutionalist argument against taking Protestant Christianity out of the constitution, and warned that full religious liberty ignored “the mighty influence which the FOUNDATIONS of a frame of government, as to religion, gradually produced in the minds of men . . .”³⁴ The Anticonstitutionalist author wondered why the radicals thought they had to change everything, “What could induce the patriotic and wise Convention of Pennsylvania, that modeled the commonwealth . . . to alter the old religious regulations as to offices in government . . .”³⁵ The key to the Anticonstitutionalist case against the expansion of religious liberty was a belief that Christianity, the best guarantor of a virtuous populace, would be supplanted by a baleful alien religion like Islam. This 1776 mock dialogue showed a rhetorical battle between two contradictory aspects of the Enlightenment: the ideal of religious liberty and toleration for all; and a fear of Islam as an opening wedge of absolutism combined with a belief in the importance of Protestant Christianity as a bulwark to republican virtue.

The 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution would be in place for over a decade, and in that time Anticonstitutionalists continued their outcry against its lack of respect for Pennsylvania’s Protestant religious tradition, and its tacit support for exotic non-republican religions like Islam. Citizens of other states and nations also took part in this discourse and admonished the people of Pennsylvania against removing the Christian religion from their constitution. One New England author warned in 1776 that the consequences of such broad religious liberty would be the entrance of men of questionable, or no, religious background into state offices. It was articles like these in the popular press that spoke to many Pennsylvanians’ anxiety over alien religions. This New Englander cautioned his readers that the Pennsylvania Constitution was too lax in its sections on religious liberty, and wrote derisively of the constitution’s sections concerning religion. In the end when the author wrote,

"I am sensible that multitudes are not of these sentiments," he hoped that reason would take hold in Pennsylvania.³⁶

Another 1776 letter supposedly from Holland exhorted Pennsylvanians, "Your religion too seems in danger ever since the Quebec bill passed."³⁷ The reference to the Quebec Act itself illustrated that early Americans feared that their people could not be virtuous republicans without the singular influence of Protestant Christianity. Like Islam, Catholicism was one of the alien religions that early Americans believed could corrupt virtue and lead to tyranny. The Quebec Act placed Catholicism on the same footing as Protestantism, to which a majority of Americans adhered. Just as they viewed Islam, early Americans saw Catholicism as another tool of the tyrant that oppressed and corrupted free people to do its will.

In the face of these perceptions of alien religions, radical Whigs in 1776 tried to argue with more moderate republican Whigs by appealing to Enlightenment reason, but this was often to little avail. It did not work because many moderate republican Whigs may have supported religious toleration in the ideal, but still were influenced by those Enlightenment writers who saw Islam akin to tyranny. One radical author who wished to insure the separation of church and state decried religious extremism of any type, in favor of an enlightened religious tolerance. The author refused to believe that the Protestant Church was in any danger, saying that "there is hardly any [device] more false and ridiculous, than the outcry of danger to the CHURCH."³⁸ He appealed to freedom of conscience in his argument writing that "the ideas of man ... respecting the rights of conscience in religious matters are much more liberal and approved than they formerly were."³⁹ He also wrote that a republic should avoid the religious fanaticism of the crusades against the "Mahometan Empire" because such extremism was "little compatible with the temper of these enlightened days."⁴⁰

A few radical Whigs who supported the Pennsylvania Constitution, rooting their ideas in Enlightenment notions of toleration, dismissed fears of Islam as groundless and even saw some positive gain in religious diversity. One author wrote that the people who were concerned that a "Mahometan" could become a leader in Pennsylvania, should remember that Jesus acknowledged that Gentiles—the 'aliens' of the New Testament—sought positions in the early church as well. In other words, since Jesus was inclusive, the revolutionaries should embrace all people and the anxious Anticonstitutionalists should not worry about it, because the Lord would protect.⁴¹ In an article entitled "Turks Good Christians," one radical Whig looked to appease those

concerned about removing Protestant Christian tradition from the state constitution. The author wrote an essay on religion that extolled the virtues of the "Turkish faith" as compared to the intolerance of the Christian one.⁴² To this end, the author contrasted a Christian funeral with the funeral of a "Turk."⁴³ In blessing the dead the author said that the Christian left no room for the possibility of mercy for the erring deceased. The author wrote that the Christian would say, "You are damned to everlasting hell fire," while "The Turk goes not on so far."⁴⁴ The author exhibited what the Turk would say at an erring parishioner's funeral, "It may be you are damned, but the mercy of God is great . . . and he may extend his mercy to you."⁴⁵ The author called the Turk "humble" and "delicate," but labeled the Christian a "rigid firebrand."⁴⁶ This radical Whig had little faith in the Protestant tradition to guarantee his concept of a tolerant republic.

Constitutionalists and Anticonstitutionalists thus both took their ideas from the Enlightenment and came to vastly different conclusions. Radical Whigs believed that endorsing only Christianity in their governments fell counter to republican ideology, and created a Christian tyranny that conflicted with ideas of tolerance and the common good by creating a special interest or faction.⁴⁷ Anticonstitutionalists were okay with Protestant Christianity having a special interest in government, because they believed it was responsible for the government's success. To suggest that giving the same respect to Islam could provide the same progress flew in the face of not only the Anticonstitutionalists' faith, but it also ran counter to Enlightenment reason that defined Islam as barbaric.

This debate over the direction of religious liberty continued after the Revolutionary War. Although there were commentators whose outlook reflected some tolerance for non-Christians, ultimately the more negative view of Muslims won out. One example of the more open approach to Islam appeared in Hannah Adams' 1784 religious dictionary. Earlier religious dictionaries focused on facts that would help someone convert a Muslim to Christianity—to a more Enlightened religion. Needless to say, there was little effort put into understanding commonalities between Islam and Christianity among these early religious dictionaries. Adams used Sale's Koran and other European sources in an attempt to academically define Islam. Even though Adams often characterized Muhammad as a pretender, or a self-interested designer, in one of her footnotes, Adams discussed the existence of the "refined" Muslim. Here Adams made a radical distinction, implying that not all Muslims were "corrupt" like Muhammad. Adams also

recognized that there were denominations of Islam, and in so doing she compared Islam to Christianity, "The *Mohammedans* are divided and subdivided into an endless variety of sects: as it is said there is as great a diversity in their opinions as among the Christians."⁴⁸ However, Adams' small blurb of religious comparison in 1784 did little to sway the opinion of those like the Anticonstitutionalists.

In the face of conservative opposition, some still tried to encourage a better understanding of alien religions, like one radical in 1786 who praised some Enlightened aspects of a particular form of Islam.⁴⁹ This author wrote of one particular Muslim "Schiek" who "entirely disengages the Mahometan religion from its many troublesome minutiae, and everything that tends toward superstition."⁵⁰ The author further appealed to the Enlightenment thinker's love of reason when he described this new Muslim leader's view of paradise. "[The Schiek] assures the Turks that they will not find as many beautiful virgins there as Mahomet promises them; and that instead of the sensual pleasures ... paradise will afford the mental ones, superior to anything which can be imagined."⁵¹ Finally, the author lauded the new Muslim leader because he "not only tolerates the Christians, but orders that they shall be respected, as the greatest assistance may be gained from them towards perfecting the arts and sciences."⁵² This essay depicted Muslims as possessing the capacity for Enlightenment reason and tolerance. The author also implied that Christians should return the favor and tolerate Muslims.

During the 1780s, Anticonstitutionalists continued to attack Islam's corrupting influence. Even though some people may have been willing to accept or seek to understand Islam, most did not. The Anticonstitutionalist opinion of Islam eventually won, but it did so not only out of evangelical zeal but by mixing ideas of republican virtue, religion, and the Enlightenment. This admixture can be seen best in the life and writings of Benjamin Rush.

Pennsylvania patriot, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and physician, Benjamin Rush believed that the Enlightenment was a blessing from the Protestant Christian God. Rush's conclusion showed how early Americans could blend their religious faith with republican virtue and the Enlightenment. It was in part Rush's heritage that made him cling to Protestant Christianity as the guarantor of progress because it was enough for Rush to know that the reason his ancestor John Rush immigrated to America in 1683 was "to enjoy the privilege of worshiping God according to the dictates of his own conscience."⁵³ Rush knew that religion was a matter of conscience, but he also believed that religion guaranteed public virtue.

Rush's education in colonial America solidified the supremacy of evangelical Protestantism in his mind to the detriment of all other religions. One of Benjamin Rush's mentors, Samuel Davies said in a 1761 commencement speech, "The new birth is the beginning of all genuine religion and virtue."⁵⁴ Benjamin Rush took Davies' words to heart. Davies' address was a call for social conversion, regeneration, and reform, in the tradition of both the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment. Rush also revealed the two sides of the Enlightenment view of Islam when discussing the need to abolish slavery. In 1773 Rush wrote, "Mahomet himself . . . proclaimed liberty to all Slaves. He not only emancipated his own slave, but made him his Friend." If Rush could almost admit that Mahomet could do something good, he quickly resorted to a more negative view of Islam. If the alien Muslim Prophet, who had "corrupted Natural, as well as Revealed Religion," freed his slaves, then Americans were bound to do so. In his argument, Rush displayed the Enlightenment antagonism between Christianity and Islam. Rush also wrote that Muslims were prevailing in the religious battle because "Mahomet laid less severe restraints upon" the "Vice" of polygamy.⁵⁵ Thus by 1776, there was no room for Muslims in Benjamin Rush's views of religious freedom. To Rush, the Revolution would only be compatible with Protestant Christianity.

Benjamin Rush believed in a Christian revolutionary mission. Revolution and Christianity were intertwined in Rush's thinking because of his education in schools of the Great Awakening where evangelists taught him the eschatology of millennialism. Great Awakening, New Light evangelists Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Finley, Samuel Davies, and Elhanan Winchester influenced Rush by the example of their religious idealism, which helped Rush synthesize evangelical Protestant tradition and the Enlightenment. Rush believed he lived in an age of Christian revolution, when all things were changing radically to make the world ready for Christ's second coming. To Rush, the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment were signs of this Christian revolution, but the clearest sign of all was the American Revolution and its potential creation of the world's first Christian Republic. In Rush's Christian Republic, the forces of reason and revelation would ultimately triumph over physical and moral evil.⁵⁶

Benjamin Rush's response to the radical 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution exhibited an admixture of religion, republican virtue, and the Enlightenment. Rush believed there should be some connection between republican government and Protestant religion. After politely calling the Pennsylvania Constitutionalists "the warmest Whigs among us," Benjamin Rush proceeded

to let the people of Pennsylvania know how the radical Whigs' indifference toward Pennsylvania religious tradition had caused them to botch the newly drafted state Constitution. Rush protested, "No regard is paid in it to the ancient habits and the customs of the people of Pennsylvania ..."⁵⁷ Adding to the radical Whig reputation for following fads, Rush accused the radical Whigs of exposing Pennsylvania to "frequent or unnecessary innovations," and warned that the Constitution would "check the progress of genius and virtue in human nature."⁵⁸ Yet what was it that would sap Pennsylvanian virtue? Rush wrote, "The Supreme Being alone is qualified to possess supreme power over his creatures. It requires the wisdom and goodness of a Deity to control, and direct it properly ... I say to swear support or even to submit ... to such a Constitution, is to trifle with all morality, and to dishonor the sacred name of God himself."⁵⁹ With Rush, as with the Anticonstitutionalists, Protestant Christianity was the best advocate of republican virtue. Disavowing that tradition was dangerous, and could lead to an Islamic Republic rather than a Christian one.

Benjamin Rush also cautioned that the abjuration of Protestant Christianity in the Pennsylvania Constitution would lead to the corrupting influence of alien religions. Rush compared the State of Pennsylvania under the radical Constitution to the most autocratic of countries dominated by Islam—the Ottoman Empire. Rush admonished his countrymen that "At present she [Pennsylvania] has lifted a knife to her own throat," and warned that "the government of Turkey is not more to be dreaded than the government of Pennsylvania."⁶⁰ One edge of the knife about which Rush wrote was the Pennsylvania Constitution's indirect respect for alien religions like Turkish Islam. Rush's faith in God, and his lack of faith in man's virtue, caused him to fear the consequences of devaluing Protestant Christianity in the state constitution. It was a people's faith in God and the Bible that would best guide them on the path to republican virtue, and would help them avoid the corruption of alien religions like Islam.

From the late 1770s through the 1790s, Rush further demonstrated that his ideas of religious tolerance did not include non-Christian religions. Rush mentioned to John Adams in 1777 that the United States should be made up of "good Christians and true Whigs."⁶¹ Rush also said in 1791, "Republicanism is a part of the truth of Christianity. It derives power from its true source. It teaches us to view our rulers in their true light. It abolishes the false glare which surrounds kingly government, and tends to promote the true happiness of all its members ..."⁶² Again in 1791, Rush affirmed the

exclusive necessity of Protestant Christianity to the success of Enlightenment republicanism, "Republican forms of government are the best repositories of the Gospel: I therefore suppose they are intended as preludes to a glorious manifestation of its power and influence upon the hearts of men."⁶³ Islam's lack of the Gospel of Christ meant that Muslims were not predisposed to republican government as were European Christians.

Benjamin Rush did not believe that the republic could exist without the true virtue that Protestant Christianity provided. Rush implied that Muslims were incapable of Enlightenment progress because of their religious belief. The Enlightenment had taught Rush that Islam denied Muslims the power and influence of true common sense. In a 1798 commentary, Rush reasoned that "in Turkey, it is contrary to common sense of delicacy which prevails in that country for a gentleman to dance with a lady." Rush then posed that in more Enlightened countries "no such common sense prevails." This was a small jab at the common sense of Muslims, but a jab nonetheless. Rush thought "the western countries of Europe" and "the States of America" were more Enlightened than any other countries in the world. Only Enlightened common sense made sense to Rush, and Muslims did not have it.⁶⁴

Rush believed that history demonstrated both Enlightenment reason and Protestant Christianity to be mutually beneficial agents of progress, and that false—non-Protestant—religions endangered progress. He also held that Enlightenment philosophers were ignorant agents in God's drama of salvation. Progress was God's design worked out by secondary causes like Newton's laws and made clear by the operations of reason, which to Rush had reached their apex in the eighteenth century. To men like Benjamin Rush, the end goal of "happiness" found in the 1787 Constitution was the will of an all-benevolent God.⁶⁵ He declared that the United States Constitution was "as much the work of a Divine Providence as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testament were the effects of a divine power Justice has descended from heaven to dwell in our land, and ample restitution has at last been made to human nature by our new Constitution for all the injuries she has sustained in the old world from arbitrary government, false religions, and unlawful commerce."⁶⁶

The false religions about which Rush wrote were ones that did not acknowledge Protestant Christianity. Even by the late eighteenth century, Benjamin Rush was still using Islam as an example of a false religion that aided despotism. Rush believed that the French Revolution was the last of "three woes" about which Elhanan Winchester had written in 1793. Here

Rush's sympathies about Muslims were revealed, because Winchester's first two woes were the success of Islam and the rise and conquests of the Turkish Empire.⁶⁷ Rush's writings best illustrated the special esteem in which many early Americans held their Protestant religious tradition, and the reason that many feared religions that differed from that tradition. Many early Americans believed the influence of these alien or "false" religions, like Islam, would bring corruption and collapse to their virtuous republic. It was this admixture that allowed early Americans to decry Islam again and again while still speaking of tolerance.

By 1800, due to the amalgamation of religion, republican virtue, and the Enlightenment, Rush continued to show a special esteem for Christianity above all other religions. In a discussion with Thomas Jefferson about the separation of church and state, Rush first demonstrated Christianity's "preeminence over all the religions that ever have or ever shall exist in the world."⁶⁸ He then went on to describe his views on religion's place in politics, "Human governments may receive support from Christianity, but it must be only from the love of justice and peace which it is calculated to produce in the minds of men."⁶⁹ Islam did not promote Enlightenment principles, as Rush maintained that Christianity did. Finally, Rush exhorted Jefferson, "By promoting these and all the other Christian virtues by your precepts and example, you will much sooner overthrow errors of all kinds and establish our pure and holy religion in all the world than by aiming to produce by your preaching or pamphlets any change in the political state of mankind."⁷⁰ In Rush's mind, Christianity was to be the latently established religion of the American Republic, because it assured the virtue that a successful republic required. Rush's approach implied that any other religion was a corruption.

Rush's writings, along with the numerous written concerns of his fellow Anticonstitutionalists, revealed that one of the main apprehensions among Pennsylvanians about their Revolutionary Constitution centered on religion and the fear of alien religious influence, whether Catholic, Jewish, Deist, or Islamic. They also showed that the Enlightenment had influenced and supported Americans' antagonistic view of Islam as early as the 1760s. From 1776, when the Pennsylvania Revolutionary constitution was written, to 1790, when it was rewritten, Anticonstitutionalist Pennsylvanians feared that the absence of proper religious passages in their republican law would allow Islam, and other non-Christian, non-Protestant religions to take hold of and corrupt their virtuous citizens, thereby ruining their republican experiment. Without virtue, the republic would crumble, like so many had

in the past. Many early Americans could not understand the Enlightenment concept of virtue without pairing it with their Protestant Christian religious tradition, which is precisely what caused such a great terror of religions like Islam that veered from that tradition. Their Constitutionalist opponents also used the language of the Enlightenment to define religious liberty. But in this contest between two strains of the Enlightenment, the potent addition of religious fervor to the negative view of Islam had a telling effect. Although the Constitutionalist views of religious toleration and liberty of conscience won out in the 1790 Pennsylvania Constitution, the idea that Islam was a tool of the tyrant that corrupted and stifled republican virtue still remained.⁷¹ The peculiar admixture of Enlightenment philosophy and religious tradition meant that by the 1790s, when the United States first engaged in a serious conflict with Islam in the Barbary States, most Americans were prepared to see them in the worst possible light.

NOTES

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