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COSMOPOLITANISM, PATRIOTISM, AND DEMOCRACY: GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE JEWS

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL LECTURE

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NOT FOR CITATION

[BEGIN WITH GREETINGS FROM HIGHEST OFFICIAL DOWNWARD]

It is a great honor to have been invited to deliver this address in memory of George Washington. Lest this honor be shrouded by misconception, however, I should clarify my civic status. You might have wondered why this tribute to Washington should have been entrusted to a Canadian. In fact I am not a Canadian, or, to speak more precisely, I am not only Canadian. Although I have lived in Toronto for a very long time now, I have acquired citizenship in my new country without having abandoned that of my old one. I am both proudly Canadian and proudly American. My attitude toward Washington is therefore complex if not contradictory. As a loyal American, I revere his memory. As a loyal Canadian and faithful subject of the Queen, I wish he had been apprehended and hanged. Still, I have decided to suppress my Canadian animus toward Washington until the organizers of our Forum invite me to deliver the annual Benedict Arnold Memorial Lecture.

Some old saws are true, and here's an example: that George Washington was first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. Every one of those claims will stand up to scrutiny. Yet in addition to these three things, Washington was at least three others: a patriot, a cosmopolitan, and a democrat. So there's good reason for this edition of our Estoril Political Forum to feature a lecture in his memory.

Before continuing, however, I must enter a demurrer. I'm not a real expert on Washington. I'm not even a phony one. I'm someone who knowing far too little about him, seized the opportunity that

this lecture offered to learn more. Should there be any real experts here, please don't hesitate to correct my errors.

Washington's thought has always been controversial. Some have even doubted that he had any. Of the great minds that animated the founding of the American Republic, his was the least flashy. Indeed he much preferred concealing his thoughts to disclosing them. Thoughts, especially serious and contestable ones, tend to encounter disagreement, and even to provoke unpleasantness, and Washington resolved early in life never to give unnecessary offense. So while he expressed himself frequently in numerous letters both public and private, as well other occasional forms like as speeches, orders, and proclamations, his own thoughts have remained elusive. First among the qualities that his celebrated biographer John Marshall ascribes to him is his extraordinary reserve. So I will have less to say about how Washington himself saw the world than about how he presented it to his fellow Americans.

He presented a world in which patriotism, democracy, and cosmopolitanism not only coexisted in harmony but in which each re-enforced the others. I anticipate no challenge to the claim that Washington promoted patriotism, nor again that he supported democracy. Although he would have disliked that word (which like the other founders he typically uses in a deprecatory sense) nonetheless he defended as the only legitimate government that in which the authority of all the officers originated in the popular will. My challenge will lie rather in persuading you of his cosmopolitanism and its harmony with the other two, so it is to these that I will devote much of the rest of my talk.

Two versions of cosmopolitanism, each compatible with both patriotism and republicanism, simultaneously informed Washington's reflections. One was the cosmopolitanism of Enlightenment. Of this he might seem an unlikely champion. His early life might rather have seemed to bode deep parochialism. He received no formal education to speak of. He would never learn a language other than English, nor would he even set foot in the mother country. While there had been plans to send him to study in England, the early death of his father dashed them. So you might suppose him doubly provincial, confined to the English speaking world and to only a provincial backwater of that.

You would be wrong, however. The British culture of the 18th C. was not insular, nor was colonial Virginia a backwater. And while a lack of formal education would have hampered most people, geniuses like Washington educate themselves from the resources available to them.

In Washington's case the first of these resources was the Anglicanism in which he was raised, with its emphasis on decorum, reserve, duty, and good sense. The second was his lifelong practice of large scale farming, with its requirements of patience, resilience, and the acquisition and practice of so many practical skills. Third (and unique to him as Anglicanism and farming were not) were his early experiences in the wilderness as both a surveyor and soldier. From these last he learned crucial lessons, dearly bought, in the hard realities of commanding an army and of managing human nature generally. He emerged from them a consummate realist, a master at getting the most from people but without illusion as to how much that was likely to be.

To these resources must be added a fourth and decisive one, already mentioned. This was the moderate Enlightenment, whose teachings were available to all who could read. Washington read widely. Enlightenment was widely discussed among the educated classes in the colonies, as evidenced by the sermons of the day, many of which were printed and circulated, as well as by the prevalence of Freemasonry, in which Washington himself participated. Such circumstantial evidence aside, his writings are steeped in the Enlightenment and its distinctive concerns.

Now to speak of Washington's Enlightenment is *ipso facto* to speak of his cosmopolitanism. Regardless of the language in which you gained Enlightenment and however you might choose to adapt it to your particular environment, it was the transnational or cosmopolitan enterprise *par excellence.* It was by its very nature broader than any merely national or patriotic cause. Even if your primary concern was the education of your own society, you recognized that enlightenment in any one place both drew on and fostered enlightenment in others. Washington repeatedly describes the project of the American founding in the terms *humane* and *liberal*. In their 18th C. acceptation these terms connote a certain version of Enlightenment: aspiring to human betterment through the spread of republican liberty. For him as for Lincoln after him, the ultimate significance of the American founding lay in its exemplarity.

When wedded with his Enlightenment, Washington's very Anglicanism supported his cosmopolitanism. This may seem implausible or even paradoxical: was not Anglicanism distinctly British, as expressed in a welter of usages intelligible only in British context? True enough. Anglicanism also harbored, however, a long tradition of theological latitudinarianism. This supported the perception of its distinctive practices (ritual and otherwise) as local traditions rather than theological requirements, and as such not superior to other such local traditions. Anglicanism thus lent itself to being recast as a civil religion, of which its practices were one possible expression but of which the practices of other sects could be treated as equal expressions.

These other sects included even the Jews then residing in the U.S. Of them we might say that if they had not existed Washington would have been strongly inclined to invent them. One significant reference to them predates his Presidency. In 1786, George Mason wrote Washington seeking his support of Mason's and James Madison's opposition to Patrick Henry's proposal of public subsidies for clerics of the Anglican church, then still the established church in Virginia. (This was the proposal that occasioned Madison's famous *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments.)* Washington, however, declined to support Mason's and Madison's position.

> Altho no man's sentiments are more opposed to *any kind of* restraint upon religious principles than mine are, yet I must confess, that I am not amongst the number of those who are so much alarmed at the thoughts of making people towards the support of that which they profess, if of the denominations of Christians, or declare themselves, Jews, Mahomitans, or otherwise, and thereby obtain proper relief.

Jews and Mahomitans? Really? Neither Mason in his letter nor Madison in his *Remonstrance* had mentioned either. Virginia harbored only a tiny community of Jews and so far as we know no Muslims. It was, however, crucial to Washington's view of religious freedom that it extended not only beyond Protestants but even beyond Christians.

This will explain why just as Washington's public statements never privilege Anglicanism over other Christian denominations, so they almost never privilege Christianity over Judaism. In all these many statements I have found but a single reference to Christ, not by name and not as the Savior or the Incarnation, but merely as "the Founder of our Religion" (which I take it we are to read as the merely human founder of our religion). All Washington's other pronouncements are nondenominationally Biblical. They abound in references to the blessings of Providence, as they do in appeals to reflection, thanksgiving, and repentance. Casting Providence as the great architect of the colonists' victory in the war and the great sponsor of their experiment in federalism, Washington comes as close as plausibility permits to equating Christianity with good republican citizenship.

The transferability of the patronage of the Biblical God from Israel to America is a reminder of the inherent cosmopolitanism of Biblical faith. God as creator and ruler of all the world imposes transcendent and therefore universal standards on all peoples. His patronage of them will vary according to their observance of those standards. From the time of the apostles themselves, every premodern Christian sect was cosmopolitan by virtue not only of its openness to all but its

corresponding claim to authority over all: every premodern church claimed to be the one true church. Not surprisingly every such church bolstered its claim to universality by seeking adherents from throughout Christendom. The religious wars of post-Reformation Europe had underlined the dangers of cosmopolitanism of this type, pitting Englishman against Englishman and even brother against brother. Cosmopolitanism thus understood had not supported citizenship but subverted it. It is this that Washington inverts. In his reworking of Christianity, its cosmopolitanism converges with that of the Enlightenment to bolster both patriotism and republicanism.

Washington, who knew to exaggerate when necessary, described the status of Americans prior to the revolution as slavery and the position of the British crown as despotic. This permitted him to enlist the Biblical God who liberated Israel from Egypt as the patron of the revolutionary cause. Washington's updated God of the prophets exerted his Providence on behalf of fundamental human rights first among them those to self-government and religious freedom. This meant that not Christianity but America was the new Israel, or that Americanism and Christianity emerged from his reconfiguration as practically indistinguishable from one another.

Nowhere is this transformation of Christianity clearer than in Washington's statements about the Jews, which were also statements to them. There was then no Christian society that accepted Jews as full members. They discriminated against Jews precisely as Christian societies, from which all non-Christians were as such excluded. As the population of the United States was no less overwhelmingly Christian as that of Britain or any other European nation, there was no obvious reason for it to treat its Jews other or better than they did. (And indeed at the time of Washington's statements, Jews had not yet achieved full emancipation at the level of the states.)

Emancipation was, however, a necessary implication of the principles of modern republicanism. It is these principles that Washington expounds in his three letters to America's Hebrew Congregations. In those days there were only six -- in New York, Newport, Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston, and Savannah – all of which wrote Washington jointly or severally to congratulate him on his election. Washington was well versed in replying to such congratulations from various religious assemblies: he had received 22 of them. In each case he would tailor his reply to the specifics of the letter received, thereby responding to the particular concerns of the authors. At the same time he seized each reply as an occasion for expounding his position on religious freedom, for the benefit not just of his addressees but of the general public as well.

The most famous of the three letters to the Hebrew Congregations is that to the one in Newport. As the most eloquent of them, it has largely eclipsed the others. Its most celebrated passage reads as follows:

> 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 their exercise of their 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.

Among the many who have commented on this passage are two of America's leading scholars of the Founding, the venerable Ralph Lerner and the youthful Vincent Phillip Muñoz. Muñoz marvels at these lines as summing up like no other Washington's understanding of the entire project of the Revolution and Founding. On the one side, full rights for all, even the previously most despised and excluded. This entailed the abolition of the distinction between rulers and subjects, under which any liberty enjoyed by the latter remained at the sufferance of the former, in religious matters as in others. This was the side of the bargain celebrated in my early education as an American Jew, and that still attracts the lion's share of notice today.

As Muñoz rightly stresses, however, this was only half the story. The other was the requirement that those so included bear the burden of loyalty and civic duty, which in times of war and founding could prove very heavy indeed. Yes, religious liberty was a natural right, but its exercise required the social compact and performance of all the duties arising from it. Indeed, as Muñoz also notes, Washington's parallel response to the Quakers who had congratulated him on his election is notably more restrained than his responses to the Jews. The pacifism of the Quakers had perceptibly hampered the war effort, and Washington calls them to account for it. While assuring them that the new republic will accommodate as much as possible the religious practices of all its members, he notes that it will do so only "as due regard to the protection and essential interests of the Nation may justify and permit."

Obviously this proviso would apply to Jews no less than Quakers. The civic having actualized the spiritual in the form of equal rights for all including that to religious liberty, religion cannot lodge further claims against it. It can furnish no basis for exemption from the duties of citizenship, however burdensome these may be. If the new republic will be the first to confer equal civil rights on the Jews, so it will be the first to require that they bear the same and equal and therefore full civic burdens. The

many Jews who have died in America's wars from the Civil War onward have kept this side of the bargain. It is fitting for more than one reason that the memorial erected to them should be located in the city that bears Washington's name.

Ralph Lerner has recently offered a somewhat different perspective on these famous lines of the Letter to the Newport community. In his just published *Naïve Readings*, he contrasts Washington's treatment of the Jews with that of his redoubtable contemporary, the British historian Edward Gibbon. Gibbon, Lerner remarks, meant well toward the Jews, but in his presentation of them tended to rely on the same old tropes ("characterizations and images that had been used to stigmatize Jews and Judaism through the ages"). Washington, by contrast, ""a public man with no pretensions to philosophy—had the vision and fortitude to declare openly an enlarged and liberal policy…."

Certainly Washington in his responses to his Jewish correspondents resolutely avoided negative stereotypes of them. His basic approach was to circumvent these altogether by treating the Jews not insofar as they were different from other Americans but insofar as they were the same as them, bearers of equal rights and duties because participants in a common humanity. Whatever invidious differences between Jews and Christians may have existed and continued to exist in the rest of Christendom, the new republic would take no note of them. There they would slip for the first time into the dustbin of history.

Yet if the new nation will treat its Jewish citizens no differently than its Christian ones, Washington further addresses the question of whether such has been God's policy. The established answer of his day was no: whereas Christians enjoyed full Providential care, the Jews in denying Christ has excluded themselves from it. Christianity was the new Israel, which as such had supplanted the old. This doctrine, known as supersessionism, was common to the Christian churches whatever their other differences. Perhaps there is nothing bolder or more surprising in Washington's treatment than his rejection of this. Here the proof text is his letter not to the Jewish community of Newport but to that of Savannah, which concludes as follows.

> May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in a promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven and make the

inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

Far from enjoying divine favor superior to that enjoyed by the Jews, the Christians of America could hope for no more than consideration equal to theirs, whether in temporal matters or spiritual ones. There is only one word to describe this reversal, and that word is stunning.

The children of Abraham (as Washington refers to them in the Savannah letter) were thus also Washington's poster children, and that twice over. First, for God's enduring providence for those who follow His commandments, reinterpreted by Washington for his own time as the divinely infused laws of nature supporting political and religious liberty. Second, for Washington's vision of the fundamental harmony of patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and democracy. The Jews' new status attested to the fact that none of these three good things had to be preferred to the others, because each, if properly understood, implied both of the others. All three were aspects of a "humane" and "liberal" perspective on the world, all sang in the same choir.

Was this concurrence elusive or ephemeral, doomed to fade with the golden glow of the enlightenment and its faith in both natural rights and natural religion? Surely it was not the premise of the planners of our conference that the relation among our three topics was as unproblematic as Washington cast it. Even so, his example of a global synthesis of them, and the patient but resolute policies that followed from it, should serve to inspire us today.