



OBSERVATIONS ON THE FAST DAY

Thomas Cooper
Elizabeth Ryland Priestley

OBSERVATIONS†

Thursday being the day appointed by the President of the United States for a general fast, the Court of Quarter Session at Sunbury, transacted no business on that day.

I confess myself ignorant by what part of the constitution or laws of the Union, the President is invested with the power of appointing a day of fasting or prayer. If it be a mere *recommendation*, it is of no more importance than that of any other person to the same purpose, being not within the pale of the President's constitutional authority. Indeed I should be inclined to pay still *less* attention to it, because it has more than a semblance of uniting two subjects that in my opinion ought never to be joined together, POLITICS and RELIGION. It is a recommendation, to which if authority be given by *usage*, when it can derive none by *law*, a commencement is formed in AMERICA as in the old corrupt and corrupting governments of Europe, of "an alliance between church and state," of which the President for the time being is the head.

I should pay more respect to the recommendation of the Clergy and Presbytery, because it is in the way of their profession; but I am

† Authored by Thomas Cooper.

jealous in a free government, of any gradual assumption on the part of persons high in office, of powers not given to them by the law of the land. What is now a recommendation, may be soon arrogated as a right, and Privilege and Prerogative may soon become as fashionable and as undefinable in this country, as in the old governments of Europe.

Nor do I like to see the examples of those governments pursued here, even to circumstances apparently trifling and minute. When the late Empress of Russia of notorious memory, heard that *Suwarrow* had immolated 40,000 Poles at the Shrine of Despotism, after the cruel siege of Cracow and Warsaw, she ordered a solemn day of religious exercise throughout her savage dominions. Louis the XIVth always sung *Te Deum* after the slaughter of the people whose territories he had invaded; and his most sacred Majesty George the IIIrd appointed a day of fasting and prayer immediately after it was determined to reject the offers of peace of the French Ministry. These solemnities have been frequently repeated at the command of that religious Monarch, in England during the present war; but as the Elector of Hanover has long ago made a treaty of peace with the French nation, I hear of nothing of this kind in that Electorate.

I have no objection, but much otherwise, to religious acts and exercises where they are voluntary and sincere. But I hope we shall never be drilled into them, or compelled to wheel to the east, or wheel to the west in religious discipline at the direction of any MAN whatever. "My kingdom is *not* of this world," says Jesus Christ; but we imitate too closely those who are determined that it shall be.

That devout frame of mind which leads a man to repress his passions, to become master of himself, to imitate on a small scale the conduct of his Infinite Maker, by cultivating dispositions of kindness and benevolence, of peace and good will toward men, is a frame of mind earnestly to be sought, and highly to be commended; but there appears to me something like impiety in making religion an engine of state, and much as I may approve of religion in its proper place, I am decidedly averse to POLITICAL RELIGION.

Nor do I see upon what ground the good sense of the Judges, can justify their well-meant omission of public duty on account of the President's appointment of a fast day. The highest act of tyranny under the despotic reign of Henry the VIIIth, was his inducement of parliament to give to his Proclamations the force of Law. In the present case, the Court have voluntarily done the same thing. The *Law* says to the Judges, you shall hear and decide causes, on that day—the *President* proclaims it a day of fasting and prayer—and Magistrates, appointed and sworn to execute the laws, think proper to dispense with them in favour of the President's proclamation! Nor is the expence and inconvenience the public are put to on this occasion a trifling object. The attendance of juries and witnesses is at all times a heavy tax on the community, and especially so in this time of general poverty. To increase it unnecessarily is a measure hardly to be approved.

Nor do these fast days answer even the ostensible purpose of appointing them. I appeal to the experience of my readers whether they are not generally days of idleness and of feasting? I doubt extremely if one man in the United States really and sincerely fasted on that day.

I believe Mr. Adams is a sincerely religious man, and that his motives may be good: the greater is the danger from the example. Proclamations for fasts may be issued hereafter, by persons who have no pretence to religion at all: for it is not necessary that a magistrate should be a true believer to convert religion into an instrument of state intrigue.

THE EDITOR.

April 27th, 1799.

REPLY†

MR. EDITOR,

PERMIT me to send you a few comments on your strictures respecting the late fast. The occasion gave you an opportunity of exercising the ingenuity you are well known to possess; and as I am

† Authored by Elizabeth Ryland Priestley

willing to suppose the object of investigation with you is the attainment of truth, by means of free enquiry, I shall make no apology for controverting the opinions you have advanced. I am liberal enough to believe that if you are wrong, you wish not to shrink from confutation; if you are right, opposition will render more conspicuous the justice of your cause.

That the observance of a Fast was *merely recommended* by the President, cannot I think admit of doubt, since the constitution vests him with no power to appoint them, and no penalty is consequent on non-observance.

And why should the recommendation have less weight coming from so distinguished a character? The man who by the suffrages of a free people is appointed to the first office of government, may fairly be supposed to possess and deserve their confidence and good opinion in a pre-eminent degree; and advice coming from so respectable a quarter will excite particular attention, not from the station itself, but from the respectability of character such appointment pre-supposes.

I see no ground for the alarm you manifest of an alliance of Church and State from this assumption (as you would call it) on the part of the President. In calculating the probable consequences of public acts, *the spirit of the times* is an important consideration. It is from the *tendency of the public mind*, such acts must derive complexion and importance. This is as soil and climate to the plant. When (as was the case at the time the government of England strengthened itself by ecclesiastical influence) the public mind leans to a *superstitious* reverence for religion, the Church may be converted to a dangerous state engine; and first approaches to a combination of ecclesiastical with civil power, are in such circumstances, to be carefully guarded against. But in the present day, when religion has lost and continues to lose ground, and when infidelity with dauntless front makes rapid strides among us, we need be under no apprehension of the State seeking so old fashioned a coadjutor as the Church. The spirit of the times is a pledge of security on this score.

Were the sole aim of government the extension of its own power, with a total disregard of what ought to be the great object of

all governments—the common good, sound policy, even with this view, would not seek the alliance you deprecate. In this country sects are numerous, and no one has pretensions to an ascendancy that shall balance an union of rival claims. By this measure therefore enemies would be multiplied beyond all proportion to the accession of friends. For such is the spirit (not of Christianity) but of Bigotry that too generally pervades every denomination of Christians, that, however desirous all may be of secular influence, each would I believe prefer a government that should countenance no religion at all, to one that should support a system in the most trivial particulars inimical to its own.

That the President should recommend industry and attention to commerce, to agriculture, to education, or to objects of public utility in general, would be considered fit and laudable. On what principle then, can it be thought unbecoming in him to recommend religious exercises, which he may deem equally important in promoting the welfare of society? If no compulsory means are used to enforce their observance, and every person is free to follow the dictates of his own mind, where is the reasonable ground of complaint? And when the interests of religion are visibly declining, I think it highly desirable that influential characters should manifest their respect for it.

Jesus Christ, you observe, says his kingdom is not of this world. It is true that its rewards and punishments are not; but it will not be denied that the object of it, which is to render men more virtuous and useful, concerns this life; and religious acts may be fairly considered as a means to this end.

Your next argument, being founded on a supposed alliance of Church and State which has at present no existence, nor in my opinion is likely to have, does not call upon me for a reply.

Fasts you observe are approved and directed by despotic governments; but this alone is not sufficient to condemn them: measures should be weighed by their tendencies and effects, and not by the quarter whence they come. There is no government whose measures uniformly and invariably tend to evil; and since the object of arbitrary power in the appointment of these Ceremonies can be

no other than to please and conciliate the people, it proves they are acceptable to and thought well of by them; certainly a presumptive argument in their favour.

To your reprobation of the conduct of the Judges in sanctioning this act of the President by the suspension of business on that day, I think this answer may be made. The fast may have appeared to them *useful* and *proper*, and they might suppose that the persons who had business to transact at court, would concur in the opinion. To your objection of the inconvenience and expence to which it may have subjected persons who were of different sentiments, I confess I have nothing to reply. Such persons may perhaps justly argue that the laws of the country ought not to be superseded by presidential recommendation.

In answer to your objection that fasts do not answer the ostensible purpose of their appointment, I shall not have recourse to the common observation that "the abuse of a thing is no argument against its use;" for wisdom would not prescribe that which would *probably* be abused. I shall content myself with saying that what you call idleness and feasting, I think may occasionally be very good things; though I should rather call them recreation and social enjoyment. Whatever promotes friendly intercourse between man and man, and calls the kind affections into play, is as favourable to virtue as to pleasure; and a holiday of this kind is, to the mass of the people, a flower in the path of life: a sentiment in which I dare say *you* will agree with me, although a panegyric on feasting, *may* seem a paradoxical mode of defending fasting.

You entertain fears that this example may induce future Presidents, with less respect for religion, to make it subservient to purposes of state intrigue; I have no apprehensions of the kind. The mere garb of piety will not go far in this country. The people have too much good sense, and too little predilection for religion, to be deceived by it.

If, Mr. Editor, you think the above remarks are worth inserting in your paper, they are much at your service.