

1b – A Question of Faith

When the U.S. Constitution was adopted in 1788, guaranteeing Americans religious freedom, many states were imposing "religious tests" for those who wanted to hold public office or practice law. These tests required individuals to profess a belief in Jesus Christ. Although the Constitution forbade such tests for federal office, states still could require them for their political leaders. Gradually, however, states abandoned these religious constraints in keeping with the democratic spirit of the times.

Maryland was the last state to waive its religious test. For 30 years, the state's small Jewish population petitioned against the discriminatory law without success. But in 1817, Jews found an ally in a Christian state legislator named Thomas Kennedy who was willing to risk his political career to champion the cause of religious liberty.



The fact that he was not acquainted with any of Maryland's Jews did not deter Kennedy from fighting for their rights. Although there were only about 150 Jews in Maryland at the time, Kennedy believed,

[I]f there was only one - to that one, we ought to do justice. ... Numbers cannot make a difference as to the principle, for if a single member of the body or the body politic suffer, the whole body suffers also. If one citizen is denied the enjoyment of his rights today, numbers may be tomorrow, until at last the whole community may be reduced to a state of abject slavery.

It became Kennedy's obsession, a very peculiar one in the eyes of many, to eliminate the legally enforced prejudice against this almost invisible group of Marylanders. He became the subject of jest among his fellow legislators, the butt of jokes. But Kennedy would not be quieted. He kept pressing to have passed what he titled "An Act to extend to the sect of people professing the Jewish religion the same rights and privileges that are enjoyed by Christians." At one House of Delegates session after another, the measure was voted down.

Undeterred, Kennedy continued to deliver impassioned speeches to the state Assembly promoting the bill. In one address, he spoke movingly of the sad legacy of prejudice, which must be acknowledged and then abandoned:

There is only one opponent that I fear at this time, and that is PREJUDICE - our prejudices ... are dear to us, we all know and feel the force of our political prejudices, but our religious prejudices are still more strong, still more dear; they cling to us through life, and scarcely leave us on the bed of death, and it is not the prejudice of a generation, of an age or of a century, that we have now to encounter. No, it is the prejudice which has passed from father to son, for almost eighteen hundred years. ...

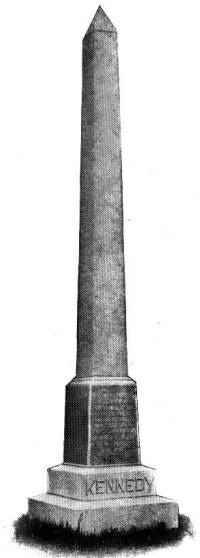
Perhaps I have ... seen and felt more of the effects of religious prejudice [in my native Scotland] than most of the members of this house. I once had a father who was a strict and undeviating Christian in his walk and conversation, and who would not have injured his neighbor for the wealth of the world; yet that father with all his piety, was so wedded to his Presbyterian opinions that he would rather have followed his twelve children to the grave, than seen one of them turn Roman Catholic; a hereditary hatred had subsisted for ages between those sects. ...

I never expect to be so good a man as my father, but having seen so many more Catholics than he, and having been intimate with many of them, and having found them as amiable in all respects as the professors of other doctrines - my prejudice against them, if ever I had any, is forever at an end.

His opponents in the Assembly denounced Kennedy as an "enemy of Christianity," a "Judas," mounting "a shameful attack upon the Christian religion"; he was voted out of office. But that didn't end his crusade. "Although exiled at home, I shall continue to battle for the measure, aye, until my last drop of blood," Kennedy vowed.

And continue to fight he did. As time passed, others gradually joined Kennedy in promoting the cause of religious freedom, some of them prominent Maryland citizens. In 1825, Kennedy was returned to office and reintroduced his bill. Finally, the measure passed - nearly a decade after Kennedy had first introduced it. The victory was, a jubilant Kennedy wrote to a friend, the realization of his dearest wish.

Eight years after the bill became law, Kennedy died in a cholera epidemic at the age of 55, and his crusade for justice gradually faded from memory. But in 1918, a hundred years after Kennedy introduced the bill, a retired state representative named E. Milton Altfeld heard about his battle for religious liberty. Altfeld, himself a Jew, was fascinated and moved by the story of a Christian man who devoted much of his political life to defending the rights of people who practiced a religion different from his own. The former legislator led a fundraising campaign among Maryland's Jewish community to build a monument to Kennedy. Today it stands over the spot where Kennedy lies buried. On the tall column is written:



TO ONE WHO LOVED HIS FELLOW MAN

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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