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A Moderate Proposal: Jonathan Dickinson and Benjamin Franklin Debate Freedom, Conscience, and Consensus

Rusty Roberson [1,2]

[1] Blue Ridge Community College, Flat Rock, NC 28731, USA; r.roberson@blueridge.edu
[2] Millennium Charter Academy, Mt Airy, NC 27030, USA

Abstract: In matters of twenty-first century public policy, age-old questions surrounding freedom of conscience and both personal and civic liberties remain in perennial tension with the necessary demands for civic conformity, custom, and consensus. These questions were also of critical importance in early eighteenth-century colonial America. In the first half of the eighteenth century, a hotbed of religious, intellectual, and cultural diversity was fomenting considerable conflict in Philadelphia, setting the stage for a vital debate over the nature and parameters of religious liberty and freedom of conscience in the colonies. Within this context of the eighteenth-century religious and cultural landscape of colonial Philadelphia, this article will examine a debate between Jonathan Dickinson and Benjamin Franklin whereby two distinctly different interpretations of religious liberty and freedom of conscience were established. Left to themselves, these two interpretations lead to sharply divergent trajectories. Nonetheless, by considering these two viewpoints in dialogue with one another, the Franklin–Dickinson pamphlet debate can serve as a useful tool for conceptualizing twenty-first century public policy issues related to freedom of conscience: policies that preserve the essential aspects of what constitutes each person's humanity while simultaneously respecting the broader exigencies for public order and responsible policy in the aggregate.

Keywords: freedom of conscience; religious liberty; public sphere; Benjamin Franklin; Jonathan Dickinson; eighteenth century; colonial America; enlightenment; presbyterian; Westminster confession; civic liberties; equipoise; moderation; civil society; Hemphill Affair; Philadelphia; custom; public consensus; Philadelphia Synod

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1. Colonial Questions of Religious Liberty and Freedom of Conscience: The Hemphill Affair

In the 1730s, a young Irish minister named Samuel Hemphill set sail to the American colonies to begin his tenure as a Presbyterian minister. Serving as assistant to Jedidiah Andrews at the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, Hemphill attracted large audiences with his provocative and entertaining sermons. But alongside Hemphill's sermonic mastery and aplomb came what the Philadelphia Synod considered to be a heterodox version of Christianity.

A commission was established by the Philadelphia Synod to investigate Hemphill on charges of heterodoxy and non-conformity. The commission concluded with six charges against him. The charges included Hemphill's alleged assertation that Christianity built upon the laws of nature (something Presbyterians of the time would not have endorsed) rather than emphasizing scripture, Christ, and the two sacraments. The commission also convicted Hemphill of denying the need for a New Birth for conversion. Another charge stated, "that Hemphill criticized ministers who 'made a Charm of the Word *Christ* [italics from text] in their preaching, thereby working up their Hearers to Enthusiasm'". The commission also accused Hemphill of his alleged emphasis upon "'the sufficiency of the Light of Nature to bring us to Salvation", and, finally, a charge was brought that "Hemphill perverted 'the Doctrine of Justification by Faith'" (Lemay 2006, pp. 235–36).

These charges invite modern readers into the underappreciated and oftentimes overlooked religious, intellectual, and social ferment of the first half of the eighteenth century in America. The dynamics were incredibly complex, defying any easy Puritan/Deist paradigm. For example, while many Anglicans would have endorsed Hemphill's positions, the Presbyterian Philadelphia Synod emphatically rejected them (Ibid, p. 236). Other Presbyterians—not to mention groups such as the Congregationalists—would have agreed with some or all of Hemphill's positions (Harlan 1983). Far from easy categorization, these charges point to the broad complex of religious and philosophical positions that were emerging within the colonial and Atlantic world contexts of the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening and that stood alongside well-grooved customs and religious traditions already established on both sides of the Atlantic.[1]

In the Samuel Hemphill trial, however, his having sworn allegiance to the Philadelphia Synod and being subscribed to the Westminster Confession led to his excommunication from the Philadelphia Synod based upon the charges delineated above. According to the Synod, the young Irishman had opposed certain articles of the faith that the Synod ruled to be essential. As a result, Hemphill soon left Philadelphia, and there is no extant record of his life after his trial and subsequent excommunication in 1735. If the story had ended there, the Hemphill affair may only have been acknowledged by a few scholars of Presbyterian history or used as a technical case study on how to undergo discipline procedures within religious communities.

But Hemphill's case entered the public sphere, causing it to take on new life. Indeed, it reached a broad audience due to a twenty-nine-year-old editor from Philadelphia named Benjamin Franklin. Working simultaneously as author and publisher, Franklin became the mouthpiece of Hemphill. To be sure, Franklin was no orthodox Presbyterian; but neither was he writing pamphlets in defense of Hemphill for purely lucrative motives. For one thing, Franklin liked Hemphill's sermons, and began going regularly back to church in order to hear them. Even more importantly for our purposes, however, Franklin used the young minister's trial as a way of conceiving a framework for freedom of conscience and religious liberty in America that was rooted in right reason and personal conscience. In Franklin's Hemphill discourse of the late 1720s and 1730s, we can see fertile seeds being sown for a particular view of religious liberty and freedom of conscience in America that endures to this very day (Lemay 2006, p. 234).

Franklin's opponent in this fiery debate was Jonathan Dickinson, then one of the most venerated Protestant figures on either side of the Atlantic, who would later become the first president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. Dickinson was a moderate in the same vein as his contemporary New England colleague, the highly esteemed Benjamin Colman. Ministers such as Dickinson and Colman were participating in the new learning and discourse of the Enlightenment while simultaneously understanding this new world through the lens of their respective Christian traditions. Dickinson and Colman were early enlightenment figures in America who were grappling with their own faith in light of a rapidly changing world. For these figures, as John Corrigan demonstrated, "new ideas were embraced, but old ideas were not abandoned" (Corrigan 1991, pp. vii–x, 3–4).[2]

Though accepting many of the same premises as Franklin, Dickinson presented a different vision of religious liberty and freedom of conscience in the colonies even while he affirmed right reason and the vital importance of one's personal conscience remaining intact. Dickinson appealed to *both* the personal *and* the collective or communal need for freedom of conscience. Indeed, freedom of conscience within one's community must be preserved in order for the bulwark of religious liberty to be maintained at all. Within the context of this particular discourse, these two viewpoints signify profoundly different trajectories for an understanding of religious liberty in America even though Franklin and Dickinson held many religious and Enlightenment views in common (Lemay 2006, chp. 10). While Franklin highlights vitally important issues that are central to liberty and freedom of conscience in the public sphere, Dickinson provides a pathway for twenty-first

century policymakers to maintain core freedoms in the public sphere while also honoring the integrity and dignity of individuals and communities.

2. Two Trajectories for Framing Freedom of Conscience in America

The foundational premise of Franklin's defense of Hemphill in his 1735 pamphlet was based upon his understanding of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. In it, Franklin presented liberty as the first evidence of Christian faith. He opened his essay with a Bible verse that states "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." He repeatedly invoked the themes of common sense and liberty as he sought a "free and impartial enquiry" into the matter at hand (Franklin 1735, p. A2).[3]

From the beginning of his argument, Franklin appealed to the people. He said that he wrote the pamphlet for the laity, because "the generality of the clergy were always too fond of power to quit their pretensions to it." In weaving fiery religious rhetoric with charged philosophical claims, Franklin argued that "we [should] heartily and unanimously join in asserting our own natural rights and liberties in opposition to their unrighteous claims." It is impossible, Franklin continued, that the clergy "could long stand against the united force of so powerful antagonists" (Ibid, p. 4).

Franklin detested that the clergy were "pretending to be the directors of men's consciences, and ambassadors of the meek and lowly Jesus." Such pretense to power, according to Franklin, should not frighten off the people (including himself) from fighting for "the glorious cause of Christian liberty." Franklin stated that his logic was the same as that of the Apostle Paul, and he insisted that it was the duty of all the laity to stand together in solidarity against their corrupt religious leaders. Ignorance, error, bigotry, superstition, enthusiasm: all these vices occurred "when and wherever men blindly submitted themselves to the imposition of priests, whether Popish, Presbyterian or Episcopal." Only they the people could preserve what he called the gospel of Jesus, which taught truth, common sense, universal charity and brotherly love, peace, and tranquility. It was they who must fight against those who were subverting the gospel and upending civil society (Ibid, p. 4).

Franklin asserted that America was a "free country where the understandings of men are under no civil restraint and their liberties found and untouch'd." Once again, though, he emphasized that they must guard this freedom from oppressive religious leadership: "nothing, in all probability, can prevent our being a very flourishing and happy people, but our suffering the clergy to get upon our backs and ride us as they do their horses where they please" (Ibid, pp. 4, 8). Franklin's passionate polemic veers into scapegoating and can seem jarringly uneven. But his emphasis on the role of the laity in checking clerical power remains an important contribution to the conversation of religious liberty along with his emphasis on using right reason and maintaining personal freedom of conscience.

Franklin saw one of the greatest infringements of and threats to religious liberty in the Presbyterian Church's denial of communion to Samuel Hemphill. He sharply contended that these Presbyterian leaders had no such right to expel a person from his or her respective religious community based upon the individual's differing interpretation of the Bible. Excommunicating someone for a different viewpoint on the same Holy Text was the exact same logic as was used by the Spanish Inquisition (Franklin often played on some of his audience's greatest fears by associating the Presbyterian Synod with Catholicism). The only force that should ever be used, according to Franklin, was the force of reason through sensible debate: bad ideas are exposed through the power of good reason (Franklin 1735, pp. 7–9).

By excommunicating Hemphill, Franklin concluded that the authoritarian Synod was promoting enthusiasm, demonism, and immorality; furthermore, the Synod was defying reason and common sense. Franklin repeatedly appealed to the Bible as his sole evidence, that is, the Bible as understood by reason and the natural world. "Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Mankind. . .gives us a full and comprehensive view of the whole of our religion, and of the main end and design of the Christian scheme." This was to love God and our neighbor, which "are what nature and eternal reason teach us; and these are the

two great moral precepts, which the revelations of the Almighty has made to mankind" (Ibid, pp. 18–20).

Franklin engaged with the finer points of Calvinism before then, concluding that Samuel Hemphill's Christianity was in no way subversive to or inconsistent with the gospel of Christ, and this was true regardless of whether or not the Irish minister's ideas were consistent with "the darling Confession of Faith that these Reverend Asses cling to with such impenetrable stupidity." Their teachings, he concluded with jeremiad-like zeal, were "nothing short of the teaching of Demonism" (Ibid, pp. 28–32).

Apoplectic rhetoric notwithstanding, Franklin's logic is clear and worthy of much consideration. For him, what constituted religious liberty and freedom of conscience was each person's right to interpret scripture by means of her or his own refined reason and nature. The force of reason applied to nature and scripture would stamp out bad ideas and release people to follow their own consciences towards social and personal reform. Clerical and other forms of coercive power must be checked, and resisted as well, in order for true liberty of conscience to flourish. Anything other than this was merely "burlesque Christianity" (Ibid, p. 41).

Jonathan Dickinson's Response

Like Franklin, Jonathan Dickinson appealed first and foremost to the preservation of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. "It is a sad and affecting prospect," said Dickinson, "that over the past 1400 years the Church has suffered under the imposition not only of creeds and heresies but also domination over their consciences." In the name of preserving orthodoxy, virtually every sect and denomination of Christianity had oppressed and coerced other parties (Dickinson 1735, p. 1). Indeed, one can surmise that this informed Dickinson's own hesitation over the Presbyterian Synod's adoption of the Westminster Confession as part of its strictures for ministers joining the Synod. With the Adopting Act of 1729, however, the Synod voted "that all candidates for the ministry had to agree with all the 'essential and necessary articles of the confession.'"(Lemay 2006, p. 234).[4] Moreover, these essentials (that even Dickinson seemed conflicted about) were to be debated and fought over within the confines of the Synod itself without any coercion from those who did not subscribe to the Presbyterian belief system; for Dickinson, this was enlightened piety that remained true to the faith (Ibid, pp. 259–60).

Clearly for Dickinson, subscription to essentials within a particular religious community such as the Philadelphia Synod did not equate with the oppression of the past. In fact, Dickinson sounded an optimistic tone about a new era of religious enlightenment: "But blessed be God, we are now in an age of liberty, wherein the cause of liberty has been most excellently defended by many learned and ingenious persons, against all the claims of tyranny and persecution." Because of this progress, Dickinson hoped the world now "will begin to consider themselves as rational creatures and free agents, and not to tamely put their necks under the yoke for the future." So far, Dickinson seemed to agree with Franklin's assessment of liberty and conscience, even noting that the young editor had made many plausible and rational arguments (Dickinson 1735, p. 2).

But this was the point at which the two men diverged acutely on the meaning of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Referring to the centuries of bloodshed over religion, Dickinson observed that it was common for one extreme to beget another. In this case, his primary fear was that a disordered religious liberty would be used as an excuse for lax social and personal behavior (something Franklin also feared). For Dickinson, religious liberty must not move from one extreme to the other. Rather, in a striking tone of moderation, he contended that it should be safeguarded on all sides (Ibid, p. 2).

Dickinson wanted to ensure the space for free and authentic pursuit of transcendent realities. He contended that a disregard for transcendent truths within the discussion of religious liberty would lead not to a promotion of charity and tolerance but rather a complete dismantling of the truths that help to safeguard liberty in the first place (Ibid, p. 2). But in the public square, this authentic personal search was only part of the story.

Dickinson continued that force or violence should never be used in matters of religious debate. "Principles of religion," he claimed, "fall under the immediate cognizance of every man's conscience, which has no matter upon earth and is accountable to none but the supreme Lord of Conscience." Every person, and every religious institution or what he called a religious Society, had "the same title to suppose themselves in the right, and to steadfastly adhere to their own sentiments whatever they be." Dickinson believed that the difference between truth and error were worlds apart, and one's soul was in danger if he or she walked in the wrong path. Nonetheless, all persons thought they were the ones who were in the right, and each could give evidence to support this claim (Ibid, pp. 3–4).

From this premise flowed Dickinson's belief that it was foundational to religious liberty that all people and religious Societies be able to preserve what he called their liberty of private judgment. We do not have the luxury of fully knowing whether we are right on any given issue; therefore, each of us must allow everyone else to believe what they will. Because this was a necessary tenet in Dickinson's logic of religious liberty, he emphasized "the necessity of mutual forbearance, kindness and charity towards one another, notwithstanding our different speculations in doctrinal points." Why? "For I have no more cause to be displeased with another for his different opinions, than he has to be displeased with me" (Ibid, p. 4). Therefore, humility was a necessary precondition for engaging with persons to whom one disagreed: the recognition that we all see these things through a glass darkly even as we in good faith follow the light we have been given with hope and conviction.[5]

The *scope* of Christian liberty and charity was the "thorny question" that Dickinson next attempted to answer. Christian communion should be extended to all people, according to Dickinson, even if fellow communicants strongly disagreed with each other. The only requirement was that an individual adhere and defer to what the community considered essential to the faith (Ibid, p. 4). It is worth noting here the historical context of the Hemphill affair: Hemphill subscribed to the Westminster Confession and other orthodox Presbyterian beliefs and practices once he had arrived in Pennsylvania in 1734. Dickinson was arguing within the context of preserving the integrity of such an oath (Lemay 2006, p. 233).

And herein lies the crux of the dilemma of religious liberty in eighteenth-century colonial America. On the one hand, Dickinson argued that for a religious Society to be forced to provide communion to those who disagreed with it over the essentials of its faith would be to trample upon that community's collective conscience (Dickinson 1735, p. 5). Franklin, on the other hand, believed no Christian institution had a right to say what constituted the essentials of that faith; to do so was to follow the logic of the Inquisition. To Franklin, any person who was appealing to reason, scripture, and his or her personal conscience should never be excommunicated from any Christian institution; this was a violation of the very essence of the gospel (Ibid, p. 7).[6]

Dickinson agreed with Franklin that it was reason that should guide one's interpretation of the faith. But he argued that each religious community must maintain the ability to use its own internal reason based upon sound tradition, custom, and creeds as the standard for faith and practice. But if communities were allowed to maintain their conscience by applying their own collective reason to scripture, then that meant some people would fall outside of the parameters of that community (Ibid, p. 10). Indeed, every person has the right to claim that he or she has the truth; if that person or institution acts against this truth, the person or institution has committed a violation against conscience, which Dickinson called a sin against God.

If the Philadelphia Synod was denied the right to its own beliefs because other people outside of the Synod thought it was in error, argued Dickinson, then no religious Society had the right to judge the truth for itself. The result was that "we should argue all Christian Liberty into the grave." Put another way, "if we must approve and support such in the exercise of the ministry among us, whom we in our consciences believe are acting counter to the great ends of the ministry, we have lost all liberty of being faithful to God, and our own consciences" (Ibid, pp. 19–20).

Dickinson once again reiterated that both he and Franklin agreed that any imposition of any kind by church or state was an infringement upon religious liberty. But Dickinson was arguing that religious liberty must go even further. No one had the right to tell any other person or institution what constituted the essentials of the faith (Ibid, p. 26). That decision should be completely left to each person or religious Society. Therefore, Dickinson's toleration was built not upon a civil consensus over the essentials of the faith but rather a respect for every person or group's freedom to decide according to the dictates of conscience.

Franklin, on the other hand, was arguing for a broad public consensus of what he felt constituted the essentials of the Christian faith: that is, scripture, right reason, and nature. Whereas Franklin sought a broad faith rooted in civil society to be the standard of Christianity in the colonies, Dickinson emphasized that each religious community should remain intact, committed to the practice of loving God within the light it claimed to have received even as each religious Society tolerated other communities with whom they even passionately disagreed. He even explicitly included Catholics in this model: a foreign and feared group that many British Protestants saw as a threat.[7] For Dickinson, how could it be otherwise? "If any of these be told that they don't understand the design and meaning of the texts they quote, the same answer will be retorted with equal assurance." So how could such disparate viewpoints be held together by Franklin's understanding of tolerance if such diversity is thwarted in the name of religious liberty? How could such seemingly disparate persons worship freely and in accordance with her or his individual conscience? According to Dickinson, Franklin's interpretation would make religious liberty a straw man and freedom of conscience a mere ruse (Dickinson 1735, pp. 27–29).

Dickinson ended with a sharp critique of and provocative challenge to Franklin's core argument. He contended that Franklin's model of religious liberty could only work if Franklin were prepared to claim and prove that his version of the gospel was infallible (Ibid, pp. 29–30). Dickinson's hyperbolic challenge was clear: Franklin's cloaked rhetoric of religious liberty would in fact stifle the very conscience of the people it claimed to be liberating. In an ironic twist, Dickinson was arguing that Franklin's version of religious liberty was a disguised form of an established religion to which everyone must adhere. The Presbyterian minister was arguing that true religious liberty demanded disestablishment (both Franklin's version and the Church of England's).

Interestingly, Dickinson ended his treatise with a block quote of John Locke, presumably as a way of proving his argument concerning the nature and parameters of religious liberty as well as a nod towards his belief that he was promoting a religious liberty that was consistent with enlightenment thought: one that maintained freedom of conscience both in the private and public sphere. Locke's quote is worth noting at length:

"This is the fundamental and immutable Right of a spontaneous Society, that it has power to remove any of its members, who transgress the rules of its institution. But it cannot by the accession of any new members, acquire any jurisdiction over those, that are not joined with it. And therefore peace, equity, and friendship are always mutually to be observed, by particular Churches, in the same manner, as by private persons, without any pretence of superiority or jurisdiction over one another" (Ibid, p. 30).

3. Conclusions

This particular debate in the public sphere by Jonathan Dickinson and Benjamin Franklin presents a useful precedent for policymakers in the twenty-first century. While in no way downplaying Franklin's concerns, Dickinson's framework for religious liberty and freedom of conscience provides the space for disparate groups to tolerate one another authentically and actively in the public sphere as well as in legal and political discourse. It could steer a culture with mind-boggling diversity and allow for a true celebration of that diversity without individuals or groups being coerced into specific religious or secular creeds (Lemay 2006, chp. 10). It could also lead to humility and deference in policymaking decisions that would allow for the promotion of moderation as we collectively situate

ourselves "somewhere in the middle of an ethical arc" between extremes (Calhoon 2008, p. 4). Policies related to freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and institutional integrity are numerous and ever-pressing; they remain essential policy issues to get right when seeking to preserve and extend authentically free societies. Franklin and Dickinson have forged a fruitful path.

Franklin's views in the Hemphill Controversy reflected a desire to avoid an American public sphere that was dominated by extremism and bigotry. He was calling for a broad, Christian consensus to underpin American society that was based upon ideas of tolerance, virtue, right reason, and personal freedom from institutional oppression and superstition. Franklin's enlightenment ideals remain fruitful points of departure for disparate groups in a shared political and social space.

But Franklin's broad consensus could prove oppressive if not practiced within the cast of Dickinson's clear-eyed understanding that at the core of religious liberty and freedom of conscience stands *persons in community*. Dickinson sought equipoise between the individual and the communal: indeed, the two must be understood as symbiotic for nurturing a truly free society. Such a crisp logic was bolstered by the overall tone of Dickinson's rebuttal. He first sought common ground with equanimity and goodwill. He then explored ways to build comity even while starkly presenting the implications of the opposing view. Dickinson drew from both Enlightenment and religious ideals of civility and charity, making his model all the more important for twenty-first century policymakers.

Civil and charitable discourse in the public sphere requires moderation and humility. Furthermore, while a broad consensus orbiting ideals of reason, virtue, and civility is crucially important in the twenty-first century, equally important for civil society, religious communities, and individual persons is that individuals and institutions be allowed the respect and space to pursue truth as they see fit. This is the nourishing root of religious liberty and freedom of conscience without which the flowering plant of tolerance and freedom will die.

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Notes

1 Harlan's was a path-breaking article for dispelling the binary narrative of distinct and hard-fast Old and New Light divisions during the Great Awakening. It remains an article worthy of consideration along with many more recent historiographical works that paint a more textured and ornate picture of eighteenth-century colonial America and Atlantic world.

2 Lemay explains that no evidence exists for Dickinson having participated in the trial of Hemphill even though his role became central for the Presbyterian Synod. He also disproves the idea of Franklin writing for only lucrative purposes, but that his defense of Hemphill sealed the young ministers fate of excommunication. This exchange between Dickinson and Franklin is only a part of a larger and rather vicious pamphlet war in the 1730s. This article homes in on the religious liberty and freedom-of-conscience aspect of it. For a complete and enlightening history of the entire Hemphill Controversy, see Lemay (2006, p. 234, chp. 10).

3 Scholars affirm that Franklin was responsible for this publication whether he wrote every word or else perhaps strongly edited another version. It appears safe, therefore, to subscribe the publication to him fully. For more on this historical context, see Lemay (2006, p. 247).

4 See Lemay (2006, chp. 10, p. 234). As Lemay explains, Franklin had published this Adopting Act. See Lemay (2006, p. 234). It is interesting to note that, once Hemphill was censured from the Philadelphia Synod, he preached in the place where the Philadelphia Assembly once met, a foreshadowing of the dynamics in Philadelphia once Whitefield arrived in that city.

5 See Lemay (2006, pp. 259–60). Lemay here quotes at length Dickinson, who at one point admonishes that, "'For tho' it be true, that I have no juster Pretence than any other Person, to determine what is a fundamental Article of Religion; and on that Account to impose my Opinion upon others: Yet I have an undoubted Right, to judge for my self, and to reject those Opinions which I

think fundamentally erroneous; and consequently to enjoy the Liberty of my *Conscience*, by refusing Communion with those, that I think unqualified for it. . .As I may not impose my *Credenda* on other Men, neither may they impose theirs on me. If I think in my Conscience, *Arianism* (for Instance) unqualifies a Man for my Communion, must I be forced against my *Conscience*, to have either Christian or Ministerial Communion with such a Person? What then becomes of the *Freedom* and *Liberty* that this Author so strenuously argues for?"

[6] Dickinson recognized the basic assumptions they both were making in their opposition to one another. Franklin was arguing that no person should be rejected from a religious Society due to that person's personal interpretation of scripture; the fact that they were appealing to scripture with right reason and good conscience was enough. According to Dickinson, this was a premise that Franklin merely assumed was the nature of things.

[7] It is worth reiterating that, in the fiercely British Anti-Catholic world of the eighteenth century, Dickinson's model of toleration even included Catholics, whom he conceded were allowed to believe as they would without interference from others. Such an allowance was a major gesture by Dickinson of authentic toleration, goodwill, and commitment to the principles of religious liberty as the backbone of civil society.

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