Religious Liberty Spotlight: John Leland

In 1790, after years of ministry in Virginia, John Leland returned to New England and began serving churches there and writing tracts on behalf of religious freedom. One of them, *The Right of Conscience Inalienable*, attacked the establishments of religion that still existed in Massachusetts and Connecticut. In it, Leland forcefully defends not just toleration, but a true religious liberty. Leland’s time in Virginia is also stamped on this document, as it echoes Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

“Does a man upon entering into social compact surrender his conscience to that society to be controlled by the laws thereof, or can he in justice assist in making laws to bind his children’s consciences before they are born?” I judge not, for the following reasons:

1. Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his conscience. If government can answer for individuals at the day of judgment, let men be controlled by it in religious matters; otherwise let men be free.

2. It would be sinful for a man to surrender that to man which is to be kept sacred for God. A man’s mind should be always open to conviction, and an honest man will receive that doctrine which appears the best demonstrated; and what is more common than for the best of men to change their minds? . . . How painful then must it be to an honest heart to be bound to observe the principles of his former belief
after he is convinced of their imbecility? and this ever has
and ever will be the case while the rights of conscience are
considered alienable.

3. But supposing it was right for a man to bind his own
conscience, yet surely it is very iniquitous to bind the
consciences of his children; to make fetters for them before
they are born is very cruel. And yet such has been the
conduct of men in almost all ages that their children have
been bound to believe and worship as their fathers did, or
suffer shame, loss, and sometimes life; and at best to be
called dissenters, because they dissent from that which they
never joined voluntarily. Such conduct in parents is worse
than that of the father of Hannibal, who imposed an oath
upon his son while a child never to be at peace with the
Romans.

4. Finally, religion is a matter between God and individuals,
religious opinions of men not being the objects of civil
government nor any ways under its control.

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