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[Backus, Isaac], 1724-1806.

A Letter to a Gentleman.

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L E T T E R

To a GENTLEMAN

I N T H E

Massachusetts General Assembly,

Concerning Taxes to support Religious
Worship.

[By] Joseph Backus

———“ I also will shew mine Opinion.”———
ELIHU.

[Boston]

Printed in the Year 1771.

HONOURED SIR,

IT has been often observed, that Men are apt to run from one Extreme to another, and perhaps they do so as much in their treatment of Rulers, as in any of their Affairs ; for as long as they have hopes of Favours from them, their Addresses will be filled with Compliment and Flattery ; but when disappointed, it is turned to Slander and Abuse : Examples of which, at this Day, in our Nation and Land, are too conspicuous, and their Mischief too sensibly felt, to need a Proof : Therefore I shall beg Leave to depart from this modern Road, and attempt to follow the ancient Example before me, of avoiding flattering Titles on one Hand, and false Accusation on the other, and speak out plainly some of my Views of the Truth, concerning an Affair which has lately made considerable Noise in this Province. In doing of which I shall first make a few Remarks upon the chief Pleas I have heard, for civil Rulers exercising their Power to support religious Worship ; and then upon their late Treatment of the Baptists in particular.

The leading Plea that I have heard made, for Rulers exercising Authority in the Affair is, that ancient Rulers did so ; and the Church has a Promise, that Kings shall be her nursing Fathers, and Queens her nursing Mothers. It is readily granted that Rulers as well as others ought to be
good

good Men, and to use all their Influence in a Gospel Way, to promote Religion ; but I am not convinced that they have any Warrant to use the civil Sword to *force* any to support religious Worship. I find that when the costly Furniture for Worship was to be prepared in the Wilderness, though the great Lawgiver, if he had seen fit, could have as exactly proportioned each Man's part, as to have given the Pattern of what was to be made ; yet instead of that, after letting the People know what was wanted, he says, " Who-soever is of a *willing* Heart, let *him* bring an Offering to the Lord, Gold, Silver, &c." Exod. xxxv. 5. And when the Temple was to be built in Canaan, with vast Cost indeed, David like a nursing Father led the Way, and of his *own proper Goods*, offered very largely thereto ; and then exhorted his People to do the like, which had such Effect, that with grateful Wonder he could say, " As for me, in the Uprightness of mine Heart I have *willingly* offered all these things ; and now have I seen with Joy thy People which are present here, to offer *willingly* unto thee." 1 Chron. xxix. 3, 17. And though particular Offerings of Money and other Things, were enjoined upon every Man by the Law, for the Support of Worship, yet I cannot find any Allowance, much more Commandment, for the use of any Force to collect it. As plain an Instance, and the plainest, of their Method of proceeding, that I have observed, is in 2 Chron. xxiv. 9, 10. When after a terrible Season of Declension and Corruption, the King was stirred up for a Reformation, and the Levites being negligent in the
Affair,

Affair, he caused a *Proclamation* to be made through his Kingdom, to *bring in* to the Lord the *Collection* which Moses the Servant of God laid upon Israel ; and *all the Princes, and all the People rejoiced and brought in*. They brought it themselves ; and I cannot find but one Intimation, in all their History, of the use of *Force* in such Affairs, and that will hardly be pleaded as a Precedent for us now to follow. 1 Sam. vi. 16.

And if Force was not used under a Law given from infallible Authority, what shall we think of it among those who profess to renounce Infallibility ! The Gospel expressly allows of the civil Magistrate's use of the *Sword to execute Wrath*, in the Kingdoms of this World ; but though the crafty Jews, when they found that their Charge against Jesus of *Blasphemy*, would not avail with a Roman Governour, they then tried to represent him as an Enemy to *Cæsar*, yet when Pilate enquired into the Case, Jesus answered, " My Kingdom
" dom is not *of this World* ; if my Kingdom
" were of this World, then would my Servants
" *fight* :—But now is my Kingdom *not from*
" *hence*." And goes on to shew that his Kingdom does not receive it's Support *from* earthly Power, but *from* TRUTH. Joh. xviii. 36, 37. If so, then what is that Religion which it's Professors often say, " would soon fall if it was not
" supported by civil Power ?" How much more agreeable to our Lord's Words, are Mr. Locke's Sentiments, than these Men's ? He says, " The
" Business of Laws is not to provide for the Truth
" of Opinions, but for the Safety and Security of
" the

“ the Common-wealth, and of every particular
 “ Man’s Goods and Person ; and so it ought to
 “ be ; for TRUTH certainly would do well
 “ enough if she were once left to shift for herself.
 “ She seldom has received, and I fear never will
 “ receive, much Assistance from the Power of
 “ great Men ; to whom she is but rarely known,
 “ and more rarely welcome. She is not taught
 “ by Laws, nor has she any need of *Force* to
 “ procure her Entrance into the Minds of Men.
 “ Errors indeed prevail by the Assistance of
 “ foreign and borrowed Succours.—The Care of
 “ Souls cannot belong to the civil Magistrate, be-
 “ cause his Power consists only in outward *Force* ;
 “ but true and saving Religion consists in the in-
 “ ward Persuasion of the Mind, without which
 “ nothing can be acceptable to God.” *

But upon this I hear some say, ‘ This relates
 ‘ to Liberty of Conscience, but we hope you don’t
 ‘ call *Money* Conscience !’ No ; we trust we
 know the Difference between them, and wish our
 Neighbours did too, who so often deprive others
 of their *just Rights* ; for as a late Writer well ob-
 serves, “ To allow Mankind as Individuals, the
 “ free Choice of their Religion, and yet to take
 “ by *Force* their Estates from them to support a
 “ Religion or Worship which they do not choose,
 “ is a piece of *Oppression* that would make even
 “ a moral Heathen blush ; yet many Instances of
 “ the same have we had, and still have.” And
 what Work do these Men make of our Lord’s
 representing to Pilate, that he need not fear his
 Kingdom’s

* Letter on Toleration.

Kingdom's interfering with Cæsar's, because his Servants were not to promote it by the *Sword*, but with *Truth*? For now they tell us, that then the Rulers were Heathens, but when they became christian, they ought to exercise Power to support Religion: Which is no better than to make our Lord say to Pilate, ' You need not fear my giving Trouble to the valiant *Romans*, for I have not ' Power to do it, and am not likely to get the ' Sword into my Hand until long after Cæsar is ' dead !'

Accordingly when Peter's pretended Successor had got the Sword into his Hand, he did much more with it than to cut off Men's *Ears*, for he cut their Souls and Bodies asunder in a hellish Manner; and though such an use of it is much out of Credit among us, yet to use it in the very Language of *Eli's* Sons, is much pleaded for, viz. If you will not *give it me*, I will *take it by Force*!

Another Plea for such Conduct is, they say, ' These Lands were given upon Condition of ' supporting our Worship, and if you do not like ' the Condition you may go off and leave them.'— By whom were they given? If by our Fathers, they did not intend to take our Money for nothing, (as their Children now do) for they intended to *make* us religious, as well as to support Religion: Accordingly about the Year 1646, they made a Law to punish any that should turn their backs, or go out of the place of Worship when an Infant was to be sprinkled. And in 1651,

1651, as Mr. *John Clark*, Pastor of a *Baptist Church* in *Newport*, with his Friends, were at Worship in their own Way, on Lord's-day July 20th. at the House of Mr. *Witter's* in *Lynn*, they were seized, and forcibly carried to the Parish Worship, and afterward sent Prisoners to *Boston*; where one was fined £. 20. and another £. 30. Not only for setting up another Worship; but part of their Crime was, their not joining in the Parish Worship when they had carried them there; and he that was fined £. 30 for refusing to pay it, was whipt 30 Lashes: And two of his Friends, for openly taking him by the Hand, and praising God for his Courage and Constancy, were fined 40s. each, or to be whipt. "Thus, says Mr. *Neal*, the Government of *New-England*, "for the sake of Uniformity in divine Worship, "broke in upon the natural Rights of Mankind, "punishing Men, not for disturbing of the *State*, "but for their differing Sentiments in Religion." And though Dr. *Mather* pleads, that, "This "Separation of the *Annabaptists* (as he calls them) "was a manifest Violation of the Laws of the "Common-wealth, concerning the orderly gathering of Churches;" yet, Mr. *Neal* replies, this Plea, "Condemns all the dissenting Congregations that have been gathered in *England*, since the Act of Uniformity in the Year "1662." And, says he, "Let the Reader judge, "who had most Reason to complain; the *New-England Churches*, who would neither suffer "the *Baptists* to live quietly in their Communion, "nor separate peaceably from it? Or these unhappy Persons, who were treated so unkindly "for

“ for following the light of their Consciences ?” *
 When the account of these Proceedings got to England, Sir Richard Saltonstall, wrote to his Friends in Boston, that he was grieved to hear of such Courses in this Wilderness, as they went to prevent ; and which tended to make Hypocrites : To which Mr. Cotton, (one of the most eminent Fathers of the Country) answers, “ We believe
 “ there is a vast difference between Mens Inven-
 “ tions, and God’s Institutions : We fled from
 “ Mens Inventions, to which we else should have
 “ been compelled ; † we compel none to Mens
 “ Inventions.—If it did make Men Hypocrites,
 “ yet better to be Hypocrites than profane Per-
 “ sons. Hypocrites give God part of his due, the
 “ outward Man, but the profane Person giveth
 “ God neither outward nor inward Man.” ‡—
 Thus they were in earnest to do us some good, and not get away our Money for nothing ; and though these Proceedings of their’s are generally now condemned, and by some exclaimed against at a great rate ; yet I fear the Body of the present Generation imitate them more, in these two, great est of all their Errors, viz. assuming a Power over their Neighbours that did not belong to them, and
 B thinking

* Neal’s History of New-England, Vol. I. Page 299.—305.

† Here we see an Instance of the Force of Prejudice : For I believe it will be generally allowed that the Baptists call many Things in the Church of New-England, “ Men’s Inventions,” with full as much Propriety as Mr. Cotton calls the Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Old England, Men’s Inventions. And therefore his Argument is good for nothing.

‡ Massachusetts History, Vol. III. pag. 405, 406.

thinking that Hypocrisy does some good, than they do in any of their Virtues ! And if our Fathers erred in such Compulsions then, what are those doing who bring these Errors to justify their own Compulsions now ! If it be said, that our Lands were given us by Charter, then it is well known that the Charter gives general Liberty of Conscience, and gives others no more Power to compel *us* to support *their* Worship, than it does *us* to compel *others* to support *ours*.

When we come to this, some would bear us in hand, that we have actually as much Liberty as the other Denomination ; therefore to such I will suppose a Case, that I heartily wish they may never experience : Suppose *Episcopacy* should be established in New-England, and yet should allow them a Toleration, but only upon these Terms, that they must certify, not only concerning their Church-members, but also of every Person in their Congregations, that they believe them to be *conscientiously* of their Persuasion, or else have them all taxed to support Episcopacy ; yea, and to do this by such a certain Day *every* Year, and (their Minister being one that *must* sign the Certificate) if any Difficulty should happen between the Church and him, so as to prevent its being done by the appointed Day, then to have their Church and all taxed to support other Worship (as we have had such an Instance of a Church consisting of above 50 Members) : Add to which, if the tolerating Laws should be attended with the Corruption Mr. Locke describes, viz. “ Princes speaking or writing to their Servants, in their ordinary
“ nary

" nary Commands, are easily understood ; speak-
 " ing to their People in their Laws, are not so." *
 If these Laws should be so hard to be understood,
 as to cost them Hundreds, or Thousands of Pounds
 from Year to Year, at executive Courts, to plead
 for their Rights ; and in their Tryals, to have all
 their own Denomination taken off from the Jury,
 and sometimes not so much as allowed to be
 Witnesses, but have their Cases tried by Judges
 and Jurors, whose *Interest swayed* the other Way :
 If after all this, the Episcopallians should tell these
 People, that they had as great Liberty as them-
 selves, could they help thinking, that either those
 Men were *blinded by Self-interest*, or else did not
 believe what they said themselves ! And if after
 long Struggles in this Way, a perpetual Law
 should be made, which cut off a Number of their
 Brethren from any shadow of this Liberty at all ;
 by Virtue of which, their Lands, which they had
 cleared with the peril of their Lives, because of
 Indian Savages, should be torn from them to
 support others Worship, and that at such a rate
 that 20 Acres, with a Building on it, and a good
 Orchard, which is particularly valuable in a new
 Place, should all be sold for 35*l.* and after five
 Journies in a Year, of above an hundred Miles,
 to the General Court, and long waiting there for
 Relief, should at last be told by a Number of its
 Members, * That they had good Right to make
 * that Law, and to keep these People under it as
 * long as they pleased ;' which Law the King
 himself could not disannul, if it was let alone a-

* Essay on Understanding, P. III. Chap. 10. 5, 12.

nother Year : And therefore they should make a Motion toward applying to his Majesty before it was too late : Upon which an anonymous Writer should artfully represent, in several News-Papers, that these People complained without the *least* Cause, and challenge them to shew any if they could. If upon this a worthy Minister, lately come among them, should, with Advice of his Brethren, publish a brief Sketch of their capital Grievances ; yet, instead of any fair Answer, should be treated with such Stuff as this :—
 “ There is a little upstart Gentleman, lately settled
 “ in Town,——the *Youth* discovers a most in-
 “ sufferable *Arrigance* :——I very much *suspect*
 “ he is one employed by the *Enemies* of America,
 “ to *defame* and blacken the Colonies ;—to spread
 “ the *Seeds of Discord* among the Provinces,”
 &c. &c. And yet that the Writer of all this should have the Impudence to subscribe himself a *Catbolick* Member of this same Denomination of People !

Suppose all this, and more of like Nature, should happen, could all the Men upon Earth, ever perswade them to believe, that they were allowed equal Liberty with their Oppressors ! Yet, without the least Exaggeration, this is the true State of our Case ; therefore I leave it, Sir, to your Judgment, whether this last piece of *Rodomontade*, which appears in the *Evening-Post* of January 7th. does not look much more like the Jesuitical Tricks of *Roman Catholicks*, than like a *Catholick Baptist*.

And

And though we have sufficient Evidence, that a principal Instrument of our capital Grievance, is one who has been openly honored by the late Governor, for his appearing in Opposition to those called Sons of LIBERTY ; yet we have as full Evidence, that we have suffered from the other Party, into which our Country is unhappily divided : So that we cannot justly lay the blame of all our Troubles to either Side. And what I have seen has often reminded me of Mr. *Wright's* Remark, sixty Years ago :

‘ Tho’ Whigs and Tories be each others Foes,
 ‘ And act in divers Circles, yet they close
 ‘ In this great Centre, and at last do fall
 ‘ Upon the point of wishing SELF HAD ALL.’

Therefore I have made this Attempt to turn each Side to read an ancient Law, which, though often forgotten by us, yet will be that by which we must all be acquitted or condemned, after all earthly Law-books are burnt up ; and Dr. *Watts's* Comment upon it may doubtless be helpful in the Affair :

‘ Is Reason ever at a Loss ?
 ‘ Call in Self-love to judge the Cause :
 ‘ Let thy own fondest Passion shew
 ‘ How we should treat our Neighbour too.’

If this Law of Equity may but now have its proper Influence, both with Regard to what we have already suffered, and with Regard to our future Liberty ; then if any of our People should
 interrupt

