

**June 2009**  
**John Leland**

(Fifth in a series of articles commemorating the 400 year anniversary of Baptists)

John Leland (1754-1841) was the leading spokesman in the South for religious liberty during the formative days of our nation. Born in Massachusetts, he served his fruitful years (1776-1791) in Virginia. Leland's gifts served him best as an evangelist and agitator, though he did serve several years as a pastor. Though he lacked formal education he was a voracious reader and had a keen mind, making him one of the best-informed Baptist ministers of his time. He was a fierce, witty, and sometime eccentric advocate for complete religious liberty.

Leland argued in spoken and written word that religious establishments always corrupt both church and state. They corrupt the church by propping up the church not with spiritual power, but the coercive and sometimes violent power of the state. They corrupt the state by making it lord over the conscience. If the state has the power to dictate what kind of religious beliefs and behaviors one must have, it has put itself in the place of God. For mankind will stand before the judgment seat of God, based not on the laws of the lands, or even the creeds of the church. Mankind will stand singularly before God and be judged on their personal decisions related to the Almighty.

To those who feared Christianity would perish without state support, Leland maintained, "It is error, and error alone, that needs human support." The real motive for establishments, he said, was a desire "to dictate to others . . . to have a halter around the necks of others." By using government to favor the church, the Emperor Constantine did more harm than all the persecuting emperors, thought Leland.

Leland agreed that government could punish persons whose behavior broke out in "religious phrenzy" to harm others, but only for their actions, not their beliefs. Truth can take care of itself, needing no civil ruler to steady the ark of God. Leland concluded:

"Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics. Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."

This fundamental freedom in Western society has been historically advocated most passionately by Baptists. That's why when I heard President Obama speaking in Cairo, Egypt to a packed assembly hall of mostly Muslim students, I wished he had John Leland as one of his speechwriters. President Obama made a good case for "religious tolerance" and respecting the beliefs of others. As a Baptist, however, I wanted him to go one step further in speaking to the Muslim community and call for "religious liberty." I wanted him to call for the governments of all nations, even Muslim nations, to grant religious liberty to all its citizens. The Baptist voice in me wanted to challenge the world to allow all its citizens to worship in a church or a mosque without recourse, to own and read a Bible or a Koran, and to have the liberty to convert from Christianity to Islam or from Islam to Christianity, or from a religious faith to no faith at all. The Baptist voice has called for this kind of liberty because we are convinced that the only true religion is the religion that is freely embraced by the individual.