**Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom**

Author:   Thomas Jefferson
Date:1786

**Annotation:** On his gravestone, Thomas Jefferson listed the three accomplishments for which he most wanted to be remembered: drafting the Declaration of Independence, founding the University of Virginia, and writing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Enacted in 1786, the Statute for Religious Freedom is one of the most important documents in American history on the subject of religious liberty. It prohibited government interference or support for religion and became an inspiration fo the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Jefferson originally drafted the statute in 1777, during the American Revolution. But the measure was opposed by Patrick Henry and many of Virginia's larger religious denominations, who feared that churches would decline without tax support.

James Madison, who guided the Statute for Religious Freedom through the Virginia Assembly, argued that the right to religious liberty was one of the rights for which Americans had waged the Revolution. Jefferson and Madison held that the right to freedom of conscience extended to non-Christians and even to nonbelievers. Jefferson felt that religion would flourish if left alone. "It is error alone which needs the support of government," he wrote. "Truth can stand by itself."

During the years following the Revolution, every state ended tax support for churches and religious qualifications for voting and officeholding. Religious denominations had to compete for followers without government support.

There can be no doubt that the "American system" of voluntary support for religious proved to be enormously successful. Between 1800 and 1840, the proportion of Americans who were church members doubled. Older denominations--including Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic churches--while a host of new denominations arose, including the Church of Christ, the Mormons, and new African American churches. Today, a higher proportion of Americans regularly attend a religious institution than in virtually any other western nation.

Source: DigitalHistory.org

**Document Text:**

Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as it was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavouring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor, whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has a natural right; that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

And though we well know that this assembly elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such act shall be an infringement of natural right.