

# Jefferson: Advocate for Religious Freedom and Separation of Church and State in America



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As our nation's first secretary of state, second vice president, and third president, as well as draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson is often regarded as one of the most influential people in American history. However, many Americans tend to overlook his efforts to guarantee man's right to religious freedom that many of our country's founding fathers sought when they fled persecution in their native lands. As indicated by "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia," Jefferson was a firm believer in religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

Thomas Jefferson was born a child of the enlightenment, a time period that encouraged philosophers to challenge customary ideas and practices. Consequently, he developed very liberal social views, including his belief in religious freedom (Koch 2). As a young man, Jefferson appreciated the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics of ancient Greece and Rome, and believed humans are capable of making ethical choices without any guidance from gods or other supernatural forces (Halliday 197). Jefferson was also heavily influenced by deism, the "natural" religion, which proclaimed the existence of a Creator who designed the universe, then let the creation manage itself without any divine interference (Halliday 198). Although he strongly opposed organized religion, Jefferson was a creationist influenced by the deist teachings. He also thought of himself as a "good" Christian and revered Jesus. Despite the fact that Jefferson did not believe in the godhood of Jesus, he accepted the moral system taught by the disciples (Brodie 371). However, Jefferson felt the authors of the Gospels had misinterpreted the teachings of Jesus, and free from these "corruptions" the words of Jesus could serve as the foundation for a powerful ethical code. In an attempt to purify these teachings, Jefferson drafted his own version of the Bible in 1816 to provide more guidance for making moral decisions (Halliday 202). Even though Jefferson did not support structured religion and was often accused of being an atheist, religion played a prominent role in his life. His beliefs provided the inspiration and motivation to prepare "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia."

Shortly after American independence was declared in 1776, Thomas Jefferson began working on a document designed to protect man's right to form his own opinions about religion. Jefferson first introduced "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia" in the Virginia legislature in 1779. Based on the belief that religious freedom is an inherent, inalienable right, the bill outlines the importance of allowing man to think for himself and stresses the responsibility of government to respect this right. Jefferson points out that "Almighty God hath created the mind free, and...free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible to restraint" to provide a foundation for the remaining arguments he makes in the proposal (Jefferson <http://w3trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>).

According to Jefferson, any attempt to govern man's thoughts through the establishment of a state-supported church enables humans to assume the divine role of passing judgment and goes against God's "plan" for creation (Koch 21). Previous efforts to standardize religious opinions have allowed man to set up

and propagate false religions, which would be considered heresy under the principles these institutions taught. Furthermore, forcing men to support these views in which they do not fully believe continues to reinforce the sinful nature of man (Jefferson <http://w3trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>).

Through the proposed bill, Jefferson also points out that man's civil rights are completely unrelated to his religious beliefs. Proclaiming a citizen unworthy unless he agrees to accept certain ideas and opinions, denies him of his natural right to think independently (Jefferson <http://w3trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>). A religious institution endorsed by the government serves to corrupt the very religion it seeks to promote because it forces people to associate success with the acceptance of established beliefs, and a difference of opinion becomes synonymous with disapproval and exclusion (Koch 21). As a result, people tend to outwardly profess their support of conventional thoughts to ensure favorable reception and avoid being ostracized. These so-called "moral" codes for life become empty promises that represent the much-sought vehicle to attain social admiration. Since the opinions of man are not the property of the government, legislators have no jurisdiction over these thoughts, and they are not vested with the power to determine the social worth of a man based on his religious principles (Koch 21).

Ultimately, Jefferson's bill declared that no man shall be forced to support any religious organization or place, nor shall anyone suffer in any capacity for his religious opinions (Jefferson <http://w3trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>). After this assertion, Jefferson goes on to explain the impracticality of declaring the bill irrevocable since legislation is contingent on the interests of future governing bodies. However, he clearly points out that religious freedom is a natural right of man, and any forthcoming act passed limiting this capacity will be seen as a violation of this right (Jefferson <http://w3trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>).

As demonstrated by the beliefs expressed in the bill, Jefferson made a lifelong commitment to religious freedom, and he regarded it as the foundation of all freedoms. In fact, to Jefferson, America's struggle for independence essentially represented a fight for religious sovereignty. He first wrote about the importance of religious freedom in *Notes on the State of Virginia* at a time when it was still legal to burn as a heretic in the state (Brodie 157). Several years later, when Jefferson introduced "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia," the document was considered groundbreaking because it challenged the conventional idea that one form of Christianity must be established in a community and that the state must support and protect it (Witte <http://web13.epnet.com>). Since religion is a private matter between man and his God, Jefferson believed true religious freedom "required both the disestablishment and the free exercise of all religions," and therefore, the state should not give special consideration to any creed (Witte <http://web13.epnet.com>). By providing an environment that encouraged freedom of thought, the founders of this nation acknowledged that the uniformity of religion is an unattainable goal. Millions of innocent people have suffered for their convictions since the introduction of Christianity, and there still has not been a significant advancement towards homogeneity. Allowing for religious liberty and encouraging independent thought enabled legislators to prove to citizens that religious persecution would not be tolerated in the new country, often dubbed "the land of the free" (Koch 27).

Based on the idea that man should be free to form his own opinions, Jefferson's bill was the first piece of legislation to provide any kind of separation between church and state. The bill called for full and complete severance of all clerical influence from any civil proceedings, and Jefferson stressed that the American people should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" making a clear and total separation between the two institutions (Gaustad

<http://web13.epnet.com>). The legislative powers of government concern only actions and have no jurisdiction over the opinions of its citizens. Therefore, any hint of commitment to the country that stems from forcing man to recite empty words and fulfill meaningless promises that go against his religious beliefs is outweighed by the need to preserve religious freedom. It is in this freedom that “the example of persuasion, not in force and compulsion, that the real unity of America lies” (Gaustad <http://web13.epnet.com>).

“A Bill for Religious Freedom in Virginia” was eventually adopted as a state statute in early 1786 while Jefferson was serving as minister to France, and he prided himself on the fact that Virginia produced the first legislation that declared religious freedom (Gaustad <http://web13.epnet.com>). This document paved the way for the first amendment in the Bill of Rights, which guaranteed religious freedom for all and erected a wall of separation between church and state at a national level. Jefferson claimed this enactment was necessary to preserve the rights of those who hold beliefs that differ from the religious majority and to protect these groups from hostility (Gaustad <http://web13.epnet.com>). Jefferson reinforced this need in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1801 when he stated:

though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate which would be oppression (Jefferson <http://www.cs.indiana.edu/statecraft/jeff.inaug.html>).

The only way to protect the minority opinion in America is to keep the wall separating church and state high and impenetrable, and the Constitution of the United States provides this security to all citizens.

According to Marx, the primary role of a philosopher is to “not merely understand the world but to change it,” and Jefferson was able to live up to this title through his efforts to link theory and action, ideals and reality, and values and practice in his quest for religious freedom (Koch 2). Although he was not an advocate of organized religion, Jefferson worked diligently to ensure that American men had the opportunity to form their own opinions. Jefferson considered his work on the “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia” to be one of his most important accomplishments, along with drafting the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia. This document enabled Jefferson to achieve his goal of protecting man’s inalienable rights by providing a framework for national acts that guarantee religious freedom for everyone in the United States.

## Works Cited

Brodie, Fawn M. *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974.

This work contains information relevant to Jefferson's religious views. It also provides insight about Jefferson's efforts to promote religious freedom before he drafted "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia."

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<<http://www.cs.indiana.edu/statecraft/jeff.inaug.html>>.

This resource provides the text of Jefferson's first inaugural address given on March 4, 1801. The quote used from this document expresses Jefferson's desire to protect the natural rights of everyone, including those people who do not follow majority opinion.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson on Religious Liberty*. First Amendment Cyber-Tribune. 18 March 2003  
<<http://w3.trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>>.

This website provides the original text of Jefferson's "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785." The document outlines Jefferson's beliefs about religious freedom and the separation of church and state, and it highlights Jefferson's dedication to securing protection of man's indisputable right to form his own opinions.

Koch, Adrienne. *Jefferson*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971.

This work examines Jefferson's bill for religious freedom, and provides a detailed interpretation of the significant document. It also discusses Jefferson's liberal social views and his role as an American philosopher.

Witte, John. "A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion: John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment." *Journal of Church & State* 41.2 (Spring 1999): n. pag. EBSCOhost. Elon University, Elon, NC. 21 March 2003 <<http://web13.epnet.com>>.

This article provides information about the political and social impact of Jefferson's "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia." It also details Jefferson's opinions regarding religion and government's need to refrain from interfering with this institution.