

Examining Religion in War Time: Jefferson's Approach



By William E. Duffy

Thomas Jefferson was a heterodox deist. But when examining what Jefferson has to say about the topic of religion, instead of analyzing and dissecting his own spirituality, it makes more sense to here examine what Jefferson did for the world of religion. Considering Jefferson's contributions to America, and understanding his influence on modern day ideas of religious freedom allow one a glimpse into the mind of Jefferson, while still holding a historical perspective of his national influence. Jefferson himself wrote, "I never told my religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed . . ."¹ He did, however, greatly concern himself with the responsibility of addressing religious oppression. And during the world's current state of disruption, with terrorism and war on the minds of many, Jefferson's contributions to religious freedom are now more important than ever.

As an avid learner and scientist, Jefferson highly valued the power of reason and human wisdom. He believed that the mind was the clearest and most sound instrument that man was endowed with. The significance of human reason is how Jefferson first begins his bill for establishing religion freedom in Virginia. He declares that an individual's beliefs do not depend on the will, or the emotional side of human nature, but instead they ". . . follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds."² But the most important idea to understand here is that reason is the tool through which human beings discover truth.

Essentially, Jefferson's view of religion is that it must provoke a certain tension which drives a person to practice his or her own religion, while at the same time both respecting the faiths of others and allowing these differing beliefs to influence his or her own beliefs. A right balance of inquiry and toleration is necessary to foster this sort of tension. The fight against terrorism, whether it is on American soil or abroad, is essentially a fight against religious intolerance. What has happened is that this crucial balance of belief and conjecture in some of today's religions has been altered, so that what the world currently sees is religious radicalism that produces terror, instead of seeing religious tolerance that yields peace.

Thomas Jefferson emphatically stated, "I will never, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance."³ In the face of opposition, Jefferson went up against religious tyranny in America by fighting for the natural rights of man. Using legislation as his tool, Jefferson significantly changed the way government responds to religion with the adoption of his *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785*. When this bill was adopted by the Virginia state legislature, Jefferson successfully made the first step in creating an official governmental stance in how both individuals

¹ Citizen Jefferson, ed. John P. Kaminski (Madison: Madison House, 1994) p.106

² Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785.
(www.w3.trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html.)

³ *Ibid*, p. 61

and communities should think about religious liberty in terms of balancing supposition and practice. Getting this tension right is what the fight against terrorism and religious oppression is about today.

Most recently, contemporary Islam has been at the forefront of international politics and news. Unfortunately, Islam as a prominent religion has been stained with the militant ideas and practices of its more extreme sects, not only forcing religious oppression within itself, but also giving the world a false idea of what Islam is really about. Suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks have been mixed into a contemporary understanding of Middle Eastern religions, and overcoming this stigma is one of the first steps in redefining religious freedom.

The world's prominent religions tend to stress infallible truth in their own opinions regarding divinity. Whether it be Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, or Christianity, all these beliefs center on the religion's own absolute truth and regard other religions as false. Man has the right to develop and hold his own opinions about religion—it is a natural right. But it must be noted that reason naturally begets opinion, and in order for truth to prevail, individuals must be willing to both listen to and debate with one another. Jefferson says that this can only be done through open discourse because “Reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments. To make way for these, free inquiry must be indulged; and how can we wish others to indulge it while we refuse it ourselves?”⁴

Jefferson realized that it is through these different beliefs and opinions that real community can prevail through the collective search for religious truth. At no point did Jefferson say that all men should embrace a single religious belief; in fact, he said the opposite: “Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a *ensor morum* over each other.”⁵ This idea is as significant now in a post-September 11th society as it was when Jefferson put his words down in ink. It is through open discourse that competing religions can turn towards one another and embrace the notion that “. . . truth is great and will prevail if left to herself . . . and [truth] has nothing to fear from the conflict . . .”⁶ By meeting the tension that comes with questioning and interpreting one's own accepted beliefs, man is propelled to a place where he can, thanks to the virtue of reason, better understand the world around him through respecting different viewpoints.

Religious oppression, regardless of time and place, has a distinct nature that can be seen in examples from both the eighteenth century when Jefferson lived and in the twenty-first century today. “Colonial American religions,” explains Allen Jayne, “stultified individual determination of morality, religious opinion, and politics on the part of their own members and followers.”⁷ It was not uncommon for individuals in Jefferson's day to be prosecuted and punished for so-called crimes such as blasphemy. Take for an example Peter Annet, a writer who Jefferson was familiar with. Annet published nine issues of *The Free Inquirer* and was later indicted by local authorities in civil court for attempting to, according to the charges, “. . . shake the foundations of Christian religion, and of the civil and ecclesiastical government . . .”⁸ These charges do not stray far from some of the

⁴ Jefferson Himself, ed. Bernard Mayo (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1942) p.83

⁵ *Ibid*, p.82

⁶ *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785*.

⁷ Allen Jayne, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998) p.18

⁸ Frank Swancara, Thomas Jefferson Versus Religious Oppression (New York: University Books, 1969) p.73

accusations that were made against Jefferson. Reverend William Linn, quoted by Rank Swancara, published the following about America's third president:

"Consider the effects which the election of any man avowing the principles of Mr. Jefferson would have upon our citizens. The effects would be, to destroy religion, introduce immorality, and lessen all the bonds of society . . ."⁹

Examine the extreme religious radicalism that has shaken the world's sense of security in the present day. It is now a global issue; however, contemporary America has only recently been introduced to this real danger, whereas in the Middle East, for example, people have been living their lives around the insecurities and threats of religious persecution on a daily basis for decades. As Amy Hawthorne, a Soref Research Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Politics, states, "Osama bin Laden's message of intolerance and violence toward non-Muslims and Muslims alike has placed the issue of religious freedom and tolerance on center stage in the Arab world."¹⁰ As Americans attempt to understand the religious radicalism that is affecting the world today, they can compare the environment in which Jefferson lived in to the current atmosphere of insecurity and fear that the world is now feeling.

When Jefferson's *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785*, was put into law, not many would have suspected, except perhaps Jefferson himself, how this bill would so greatly propel change in American government. For Jefferson, the Virginia constitution did not go far enough in securing the changes that the Revolution should have effected.¹¹ Jefferson understood that he was in a position to establish these natural rights in permanent law, especially the rights of religious freedom.

In 1948, more than a hundred and fifty years later, the United Nations also recognized that they were in a unique position to do something about human rights and unanimously voted into law its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This declaration uses language that, not surprisingly, is Jeffersonian in structure and sound. Echoing the Declaration of Independence, the United Nations makes it clear that every human being is entitled to certain unalienable rights. But it is in Article 18 of the United Nation's declaration that truly embodies Jefferson's stance on religion:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."¹²

If the citizens of the world are going to successfully live within a global village, there must be an accepted set of principles through which individuals and communities respect one another's religious opinions and practices. In the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, we see a set of principles, that if truly embodied, would indeed create an environment for peaceful living.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.81

¹⁰ Amy Hawthorne, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom "Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism" November 27, 2001 (www.uscirf.gov)

¹¹ Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987) p.45

¹² Universal Declaration of Human Rights (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

On November 27, 2001, the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* held a hearing that specifically addressed the place of religious freedom during this time of terrorism and war. An important point addressed is that tolerance and freedom of worship can never be imposed from an outside source; that the responsibility of making real social and political change ultimately rests with a nation's citizens and leaders.¹³ Through Jefferson's own example, he demonstrated how political and social change must first work locally, expanding outward one step at a time. He showed America how to put theory into practice and challenged his fellow citizens to do the same.

It is the responsibility of a democracy to insure its neighbors' rights in the same claim to freedom that it currently knows. C.S. Lewis wrote, "War creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it."¹⁴ What is at stake currently in this time of war and terrorism is the realization that without true religious freedom and toleration, the world will continue to be slave to radicalism and indifference—the latter of the two being the more dangerous. As long as those who enjoy religious freedom, or any natural freedom for that matter, turn their attention away from international politics and human rights violations, they prevent peace and justice from properly acting. It is America's responsibility to respond to religious intolerance with a firm and unwavering "no more." When Jefferson risked his political career to support religious freedom, he recognized what Elon University's founder and first president, William S. Long, meant when he said, "Power is a debtor. Power owes. Power is under obligation, and the greater the power, the heavier is the obligation."¹⁵ Jefferson was in a place of power and he chose to use his office to affect positive change.

In this time of war and terrorism, the international community needs to reclaim the high calling of ensuring religious freedom for every person and nation, but this must start with America's stance against religious intolerance. The struggle of protecting natural human rights, especially the rights to religious freedom, must be present whether on a battlefield, in a courtroom, or in a sanctuary. And as the democracies of the world attempt to overcome religious oppression, the United States must look back to when she was attempting to secure her own freedom. And while this process has been two-hundred years in the making for America, many countries, nations like Afghanistan, Iraq and China, have yet to experience the full enjoyment of the unquestionable, natural rights that people like Jefferson fought for.

During that same hearing of the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, Mamoun Fandy stated: "The final question is: can religious freedom be a tool against terrorism?" He went on to answer, "It can only be a tool if we encourage an internal debate of religious freedom to promote tolerance."¹⁶ This type of debate is what Jefferson recognized as the ultimate weapon against tyranny and intolerance, but he knew that it was the role of government to provide the support for this free exchange to occur without attempting to influence the religious opinions of its people. Jefferson exclaimed that "the opinions of men are not the object of civil government."¹⁷ The object of civil government, however, is to protect a nation's religious rights so that people can freely form their own opinions.

¹³ Hawthorne, "Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism"

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1976) p.49

¹⁵ William S. Long "Baccalaureate Address to the Elon Class of 1908." Private Collection.

¹⁶ Mamoun Fandy, *Unites States Commission on International Religious Freedom* "Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism" November 27, 2001

¹⁷ *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785.*

Annotated Bibliography

Citizen Jefferson, ed. John P. Kaminski (Madison: Madison House, 1994)

In this sparse work, Kaminski provides his readers with Thomas Jefferson's most notable words and quotations. The book conveys Jefferson's wit while also showing his keen awareness of government.

Cunningham, Noble E. Jr., In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987)

This book is a biographical look at the life of Jefferson. Special attention was paid to this particular book because Cunningham makes reason a constant theme throughout his book—staying true to that which Jefferson let guide his life

Jayne, Allen Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998)

Jayne here examines the history of the Declaration of Independence. He studies Jefferson's influences and ideals while showing his readers how this historical document was created.

Jefferson Himself, ed. Bernard Mayo (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1942) p.83

In this compellation edited by Mayo, a large amount of Jefferson's personal writing and autobiography are presented. One can use this book to trace Jefferson's life through his own words.

Jefferson, Thomas, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785.
(www.w3.trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html.)

This is Jefferson's historic document proclaiming religious freedom in Virginia. In this bill, he asserts the power of reason and the significance of governmental respect for the religious rights of its people.

Lewis, C.S. The Weight of Glory (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1976)

In this collection of essays, one essay in particular is called "Learning in War-time," and it is from here that value is found regarding Jefferson and religious freedom. Lewis asserts that during times of war, the human situation is more clearly seen—and while it may be under unfortunate circumstance, learning and art are necessities for such times.

Long, William S. "Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 1908" Elon University

This unpublished address was acquired through a private collection. In his speech, Long encourages the graduating seniors to recognize the need to use one's power for positive influence.

Swancara, Frank Thomas Jefferson Versus Religious Oppression (New York: University Books, 1969)

Swancara gives a thorough presentation of the different kinds of religious oppression that was prevalent in Jefferson's day. Despite the book's title, we see less about Jefferson and more about actual court cases and hearings. This is a good book to use to get acquainted with religious oppression during the early years of America.

United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
(www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

This is the United Nation's response to the need for there being a universal set of rights and principles outlined and put into writing. Very similar to the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. constitution, this declaration mimics the language of these early documents.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom "Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism" November 27, 2001.
(www.uscirf.gov)

Through this website I was able to obtain the testimony from Amy Hawthorne and Mamoun Fandy that I used in my paper. This website is very helpful in regards to learning about what the U.S. government is currently doing to insure religious freedom.