

## **A Fight for Freedom: Thomas Jefferson's Beliefs in Religious Freedom for All**



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For a man who served as governor of Virginia, American minister to France, secretary of state, vice president, and president of the United States, it perhaps seems strange that Thomas Jefferson would not recognize any of these accomplishments as his most successful endeavors. Instead, in 1826, Jefferson proposed a short list of three achievements he considered worthy of inscribing on his tombstone (Maier 23). Directly underneath the line asserting his association with the Declaration of American Independence, Jefferson's epitaph proclaimed him author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom (Malone 499). When one accounts for Jefferson's many adversaries who believed him to be a man of little religion at best, and at worst an agnostic or atheist, it becomes further intriguing that Jefferson wished to be remembered for writing a bill that established countless religious freedoms for all citizens. While it is true that Jefferson revealed little to the public of his true religious philosophies, he was adamant that all citizens be guaranteed the basic religious freedoms that he argued were their natural rights.

In an effort to insure that these religious freedoms were granted to all Americans, Jefferson wrote "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia." The bill was proposed to the General Assembly of Virginia in 1779. After many years of defeat for Jefferson, the Assembly finally passed the bill for religious freedom in 1785 (Miller 37). Jefferson specifically defined the general religious freedoms that should be granted to all citizens. In the first section of the bill, Jefferson discusses his belief that humans have a free mind created by God, exposes incorrect assumptions made by others, and states that civil rights should not be determined by religious convictions. These ideas illustrate Jefferson's personal spiritual beliefs and have influenced American attitudes toward religious freedoms from the late 1700's to the present day.

First of all, in "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785," Jefferson clearly states that the opinions and beliefs of people are not independent, but influenced by evidence proposed to their minds by outside sources. In other words, Jefferson declares that God gives all people free minds to believe as they choose. Therefore, any attempts to influence or force a religion are wrong and against God's plan. According to Jefferson, while God possesses the power to make all people believe in Him, He would never use authority to coerce people in such a manner. Furthermore, Jefferson continues to affirm his position that fallible and uninspired masses have been the ones to assume dominion over the faith of others. Through their assumptions, these fallible humans established and maintained false religions over the world, forcing their own opinions on others as the only true and infallible ones. Most importantly, the first section of the bill establishing religious freedom identifies that it is undeniably wrong to require people to contribute money to a religion they do not support.

Moreover, Jefferson expands the above reasons why religious freedoms should be extended to all citizens by recognizing that civil rights should not be determined by one's religion. To be precise, Jefferson believed a person's civil rights had no more dependence on religious opinions than on opinions in physics or geometry. Consequently, it would be an infringement on citizens' basic rights if they were denied public offices of trust and confidence because of their religious beliefs. Ultimately, the bill for religious freedom professes that all individuals shall be free to acknowledge, and maintain, their opinions in matters of religion. Also, citizens' religious backgrounds shall in no way diminish, enlarge, or affect any of their civil liberties.

Jefferson's own religious convictions offer a tremendous insight into his political and personal views. Perhaps the most significant factor that led Jefferson to write "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785" stemmed from his lifelong hatred toward clergymen and the Anglican Church (Brodie 55). Jefferson's animosity toward the established faith began shortly subsequent to the death of his father. At age fourteen, Jefferson was sent to live with James Maury, an Anglican clergyman. Maury called the speeches of dissident ministers "the frantick ravings of fanaticism, or artful fictions of imposture," while Jefferson's father had believed in freedom of the mind (Brodie 55). Thus, the contrast between Maury and Jefferson's father generated hostility in Jefferson that had permanent consequences in America (Brodie 55).

The hostility Jefferson harbored as an adolescent continued to gain fervor as he reached adulthood. By the time the Revolution had begun, the effort to destroy the power of the Anglican Church had become one of Jefferson's chief goals. His first chance to decrease the power held by the Anglican Church occurred while he was governor of Virginia and a member of the Board of Visitors of William and Mary College (Brodie 55). In 1780, Jefferson assisted in ridding the college of the divines and turning the school over to professors of science, math, and modern languages. Jefferson's distrust of clergymen as factionalists, schismatizers, and prisoners of the human spirit continued until his death (Brodie 55).

While Jefferson's distrust of clergymen and the established faith played a significant role on his decision to write the bill for religious freedom, his own religious philosophies also factored into the construction of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. When Jefferson learned that many immigrants of faiths other than the Church of England—Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians—were being forced to pay taxes to support a faith they did not believe in, he was furious (Miller 36). According to Maier, Jefferson stated that "all persons shall have full and free liberty of religious opinion" and cannot be compelled to "frequent or maintain any religious institution" (Maier 29). Further, as a student of the Enlightenment, Jefferson hoped to create a barrier between church and state, allowing individuals to pursue their own philosophical freedoms (Miller 36). It was his dream of a separation of church and state that would have an overwhelming impact on religious freedoms and toleration for millions of people. For Jefferson, religious freedom and toleration were meant to serve the higher purpose of encouraging debate and dialogue among the various denominations. Jefferson was ultimately hoping that such discussion would point to the simple ethical teachings of Christ, which he considered vital to a virtuous republic (Sheldon 107).

In addition to believing in the ethical teachings of Christ, Jefferson held a broad spectrum of other religious philosophies. Although for most of his life Jefferson did not attend church regularly, he did believe in a Supreme Being and respected the moral beliefs of others (Miller 36). Interestingly, even when Jefferson attended church services during his presidency, at times actually in the chambers of the House of Representatives, his critics continued to condemn him as being an agnostic, a deist, or an atheist (Onuf 99). Actually, the only issue Jefferson seemed agnostic about was that of an everlasting life with God in heaven.

Theoretically, Jefferson probably abandoned his belief in heaven as a young boy (Brodie 170). Many considered Jefferson to be an atheist due to a single quotation which would haunt him for his entire life—and his afterlife. While trying to explain that another's religious beliefs had no direct effect on his own well-being, Jefferson said, "But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god" (Brodie 157). Other than this often misinterpreted quotation, Jefferson spoke and wrote clearly about religion and God.

Again, Jefferson believed in God and immortality, but he did not believe in the idea that God truly intervened in the lives of individuals (Brodie 25). Most significantly, Jefferson thought religion was an inward persuasion of the mind and a private matter known only to an individual and God (Brodie 129; Onuf 98). The beliefs that Jefferson did share were divulged to a few long-time confidants who often held similar views. Jefferson admitted that he believed Jesus was an outstanding man, but not the son of God. However, he considered Christian ethics to be the most advanced social ethics or morals governing human relations (Sheldon 15). Thus, Christianity was the most suited to a naturally social being and to the most social of regimes—particularly a democracy (Sheldon 15). Therefore, contrary to the opinion that his bill originated from a hostility or indifference toward Christianity, Jefferson's advocacy of religious freedom was designed to preserve true Christian teachings (Sheldon 108).

Lastly, Jefferson's religious principles and his bill establishing religious freedom were revolutionary in the late 1700's, but the effect his philosophies have had on today's modern society has been the true assessment of their significance and durability. While the changes of the past two centuries make it practically impossible to abide completely by a literal interpretation of Jefferson's bill, one Jeffersonian idea has translated considerably well to the present. Since Jefferson truly meant for a total separation of church and state and non-negotiable freedom to worship whatever god one wished, the "wall of separation" between church and state has traveled with great benefit through the centuries (Ellis 167). Likewise, Jefferson's view that the populace of America did not have to share religious convictions in order to remain united has carried over to today's society (Ellis 167). Virtually every other statesman of the period, except perhaps Benjamin Franklin, presumed that the United States would and should remain a Christian, indeed a Protestant, country (Ellis 167). These statesmen felt toleration ought not to extend to Catholics and Jews, much less to deists or atheists (Ellis 167). Aside from these shared characteristics of the present day and the 1700's, little exists in America's contemporary religious landscape that would have been familiar to Jefferson. Many common ideas and practices concerning religion have changed a great deal. Jefferson would have been the first to insist that each religious and political situation be handled according to the society and culture from which it arises (Ellis 167). Jefferson would not expect every single aspect of his bill establishing religious freedom to be applicable in today's world.

In conclusion, his epitaph best describes the pride Jefferson took in writing the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, an accomplishment he ranked second only to writing the Declaration of Independence. Through "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785," Jefferson advocated religious freedoms that would allow people to worship freely and not be penalized for possessing certain religious beliefs. The bill continued to state that people's religious convictions had no barrier on their abilities to carry out productive and beneficial tasks in the community. Although Jefferson's religious beliefs varied greatly and were far from the traditional philosophies of his era, he somehow understood the necessity that a nation allows religious freedoms. While Jefferson's religious bill could never be fully translated to the present, the general message clearly defines the utter importance of religious freedom in a democracy. Jefferson's bill establishing religious freedom has had world-wide impact on matters of religion and on the definition of the natural rights to which all humans are entitled.

## Works Cited

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- Ellis, Joseph J. "Why Jefferson Lives." *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. Comp. and ed. Joseph J. Ellis. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. 167.
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## Annotated Bibliography

- Brodie, Fawn M. *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1974. 25-170.

The author examines Thomas Jefferson's adolescence and the influence it had on many of his religious convictions and his hostilities toward established faiths. She explained certain circumstances which led to Jefferson writing the Statute of Religious Freedom and contributed toward his wish to destroy the power of the Anglican Church.

- Ellis, Joseph J. "Why Jefferson Lives." *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. Comp. and ed. Joseph J. Ellis. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. 167.

The author describes the most fundamental aspects of Thomas Jefferson's Statue of

Religious Freedom and the important principle of the phrase "wall of separation" between church and state. He focused on how Jefferson's bill establishing religious freedom translates into modern terminology for today's society.

Maier, Pauline. "Thomas Jefferson, 1776: Draftsman and Author." *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. Comp. and ed. Joseph J. Ellis. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. 23-29.

The author discusses Thomas Jefferson's accomplishments as a draftsman of legislative reforms, statutes, and other legal documents. She particularly focuses on the significance Jefferson's Statute of Religious Freedom had on the state of Virginia and on the dismantling of state religious establishments resulting in the separation of church and state.

Malone, Dumas. *The Sage of Monticello*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1981. 499.

The author analyzes Thomas Jefferson's philosophies and actions from the end of his second term as President of the United States until his death. The author explains Jefferson's reasons for writing the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedoms with respect to his time and circumstances.

Miller, Charles A. "The Passionate Idealist." *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. Comp. and ed. Joseph J. Ellis. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. 36-37.

The author concentrates on the success Thomas Jefferson experienced when fighting for religious freedoms in Virginia, a state with a history of support for an established religion. He mentions the many ironic twists in Jefferson's life and portrays the true religious beliefs of Jefferson.

Onuf, Peter S. "A Second Revolution." *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. Comp. and ed. Joseph J. Ellis. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. 98-99.

The author evaluates Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs and customs and described how they contributed to the Statute of Religious Freedom for Virginia. He discussed the attacks on Jefferson from opponents who claimed he was an agnostic, an atheist, or a deist.

Sheldon, Garrett W. *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991. 15-107.

The author focused intently on Thomas Jefferson's political philosophy and the way it shaped his religious views. He wrote specifically on Jefferson's beliefs, misconceptions about his religious opinions, and personal writings advocating the ethical teachings of Jesus and Christianity.

United States. General Assembly of Virginia. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, 1785. By Thomas Jefferson. Jan. 1786. 18 March 2003 <<http://w3.trib.com/FACT/1st.jeffers.html>>.

The author focused on religious freedoms that should be entitled to all citizens as a natural right. His bill was presented to the Virginia legislature in the late 1770's, but not passed into law until January 16, 1786.