

The Founders of the Republic and Religious Freedom

One of the issues that most concerned the founders of the American republic was religious freedom. Europe had been torn apart by religious wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Protestants had fought Catholics. Several of the English colonies had been founded by different religious groups that wanted to worship God in their own way. As you read in Chapter 1, this did not always mean that these groups—such as the Puritans—were willing to give religious freedom to others.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that it was God who had endowed us all with certain unalienable rights. The Declaration did not, however, refer to any specific religion. Historians sometimes point out that both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were “Deists” at this time. They believed that an all-powerful God had created the universe and had given each of us our individual sense of morality. But they did not accept all of Christian teachings or the Bible as true.

Virginia’s Statute for Religious Freedom

After writing the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson went home to Virginia to help write his state’s first constitution. As part of that task, Jefferson wrote a statute (*law*) guaranteeing religious freedom. Although Jefferson wrote this statute in 1776, it was not introduced into the Virginia state legislature until 1777. It failed to pass because it was bitterly opposed by many Protestant ministers.

In 1784, a new bill in the Virginia legislature proposed that the state pay teachers of the Christian religion, just as Massachusetts was doing. James Madison opposed this suggestion and re-introduced Jefferson’s earlier bill for religious freedom. Jefferson’s bill passed in 1786. Jefferson was so proud of this bill that he had it listed as one of three accomplishments on his tombstone. The other two were that he was author of the Declaration of Independence and “father” of the University of Virginia.

In this statute, Jefferson made the following arguments in favor of a separation of church and state:

1. God could have given us all religious faith. Instead, God gave us the freedom to choose our own religious beliefs. Therefore other people should not try to take away this choice. People should not force their religious beliefs on others.
2. Whenever rulers have tried to force a religion on people, it has usually been a false one.
3. It is just as wrong to force people to pay for a particular church or religious group as it is to force a religion on them against their own beliefs.
4. All of us are entitled to certain basic rights, such as the right to vote and to hold public office. These rights should not depend on our acceptance of any particular religious beliefs. Therefore, it is wrong to require someone to hold particular religious beliefs in order to vote or hold public office. (This

- was at a time when certain religious groups were not permitted to vote or hold office in Britain and many of the colonies.)
5. Attempts by governments to force people to follow a particular religion actually corrupt that religion by encouraging people to accept it to receive benefits, rather than because they truly believe in it.
 6. Religious truth is very powerful. In the end, religious truth will win out, even without any help from the government.
 7. For all these reasons, Virginia should adopt a law providing that no one can be forced to follow particular religious beliefs or be penalized for holding his or her own religious beliefs.
 8. Although like all laws this one could be changed by a later state legislature, it should not be changed because freedom of religion is a “natural right” belonging to every citizen.

The Historian's Apprentice

Here is how this argument looked in Thomas Jefferson's own words, later passed by the Virginia state legislature. His views also contributed to the First Amendment of the U.S. Bill of Rights, ratified in 1791.

An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom

Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free;

That all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or bur[d]ens, or by civil incapacitations (*taking away of rights*) tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and therefore 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 (*spread*) it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do,

That the impious presumption (*disrespectful arrogance*) of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical (*religious*), who, being themselves but fallible (*capable of error*) and uninspired men, have assumed dominion (*control*) over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavouring (*trying*) 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 (*spread*) 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 . . .

That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry,

That therefore the proscribing (*excluding; banning*) any citizen as unworthy of the public confidence, by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument (*fee; profit; reward*) 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 very Religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments (*rewards; profits*) those who will externally profess and conform to it . . .

Be it enacted by General Assembly that no man shall be compelled (*forced*) 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 opinions in matters of Religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities (*their rights to vote or serve in public office*).

[We] 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 will be an infringement of natural right.

1. What is the significance of Jefferson's first sentence: "Almighty God hath created the mind free"?
2. Do you agree with Jefferson's reasoning? Why or why not?
3. Jefferson argues that religious freedom is a "natural right." How does this compare to the other "natural rights" he had identified in the Declaration of Independence?
4. Are there any other reasons to have freedom of religion that Jefferson failed to mention?
5. Why did Jefferson feel that religious freedom required that his state government not provide money to support religious teaching in schools?

The Beliefs of the Other Founders

Many of the other founders of the Republic held views similar to those of Jefferson. Here are some of their views on religion and the proper relationship between religion and government.

Benjamin Franklin

"Here is my Creed (*set of beliefs*): I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him is doing Good to his other

Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them. . . I shall only add respecting myself, that having experienced

