

Thomas Jefferson's Act for Establishing Religious Freedom



ABOUT THE SOURCE Religion was an important issue during the Colonial era. Some Americans wanted to proclaim that their new nation was officially Christian. Others, like Thomas Jefferson, wanted to keep church and state separate. In 1779 Jefferson wrote a bill proposing that Virginia officially adopt a policy of religious freedom. Seven years later, the Virginia legislature approved Jefferson's bill. The act served as a model for the First Amendment to the Constitution. Jefferson believed his role in the passage of the religious freedom act was one of his three greatest achievements. The italicized words below were deleted by the Virginia Assembly when it passed the bill in 1786.



*As you read note what Jefferson believes to be the natural right of all people. The following words may be new to you: **insusceptible**, **incapacitations**, **propagate**, **ecclesiastical**, **emolument**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

*Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether **insusceptible** of restraint; 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 was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone; 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 endeavoring 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 and *abhors*, is sinful and tyrannical . . . 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 . . . and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and*

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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.

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact 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 opinions 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 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 will be an infringement of natural right.

Source: *Thomas Jefferson Versus Religious Oppression*

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How does Jefferson assess the historical relationship between government and religion?

2. How does Jefferson justify the arguments he makes in this bill?

3. What are three things the government in Virginia could not do after this bill was enacted?
