**Resolution Supporting Freedom of Conscience and the Principle of Separation of Church and State**

**HISTORICAL SUMMARY**

**Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786)**

[The Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-for-establishing-religious-freedom-1786/) was [drafted](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/jefferson-thomas-and-the-practice-of-law/) by [Thomas Jefferson](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/jefferson-thomas-1743-1826/) and adopted by the General Assembly on January 16, 1786, before being signed into law three days later. The statute affirms the rights of Virginians

1. to choose their faiths without coercion;
2. separates church and state; and,
3. while acknowledging the right of future assemblies to change the law, concludes that doing so would “be an infringement of a natural right.”

Jefferson’s [original bill](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/a-bill-for-establishing-religious-freedom-1779/) “for establishing religious freedom,” drafted in 1777 and introduced in 1779, was tabled in the face of opposition among powerful members of the established [Church of England](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/church-of-england-in-virginia/). Then, in 1784, [a resolution](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/tax-on-religion-an-excerpt-from-the-journal-of-the-house-of-delegates-1784/) calling for a tax to support all Christian sects excited such opposition that [James Madison](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/madison-james-1751-1836/) saw an opportunity to reintroduce Jefferson’s bill. It [passed both](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/debate-and-passage-of-an-act-for-establishing-religious-freedom-in-the-house-of-delegates-and-the-senate-of-virginia-1785-1786/) houses of the General Assembly with minimal changes to its text.

One of the most eloquent statements of religious freedom ever written, the statute influenced both the drafting of the First Amendment to the [U.S. Constitution](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/the-constitution-of-the-united-states-1787-1992/) and the United States Supreme Court’s understanding of religious freedom. Jefferson considered it one of his crowning achievements and a necessary bulwark against tyranny.

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***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** 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; and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind;

**that** our civil rights have no dependance 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;

**that** it tends also to corrupt the principles of that *very* religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it;

**that** though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way;

***that*** *the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction*;

**that** to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own;

**that** it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally,

**that** truth is great and will prevail if left to herself;

**that** she is the proper and 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.

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**Resolution for the WA State Democrats: Supporting Freedom of Conscience and the Principle of Separation of Church and State**

**Whereas** the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom disestablished the Church of England in Virginia and guaranteed freedom of religion to people of all religious faiths, including Christians of all denominations, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus when it was enacted into the state's law on January 16, 1786, and

**Whereas** the substance of the Virginia Statute is incorporated into the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, and

**Whereas** Thomas Jefferson used the words following words to encourage the adoption of the First Amendment:

*Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a* ***wall of separation between Church & State****, and*

**Whereas** those individuals, groups and institutions in the United States today who persist in deliberately misrepresenting the purpose and intent of the Virginia Statute and the First Amendment so that they can unjustly seize power for their own ends and with the intent of subjugating their fellow citizens,

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** That we fully support and endorse the original intent of the Virginia Statute and the First Amendment.  We wholly reject any form of state-mandated religion, we wholly reject any religious exemption from obedience to the law, and we likewise wholly reject any restriction on the private exercise of religion.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** That this resolution is to be spread upon the communication systems of the United States of America by the **32nd** Legislative District Democrats and the Washington State Democrats so that every American can be reminded of our freedoms and the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

**Submitted by: Senator Maralyn Chase**

Friendly amendment proposed and accepted.

**Adopted by the 32nd LD Democrats, April 2, 2025**