

A BILL *for establishing* RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, *printed for the consideration of the* PEOPLE.

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, endeavouring 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 temporal rewards which, proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labor for the instruction of mankind: That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than on 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 honors 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 own 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 overtacts 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.

Printed for the consideration of the PEOPLE as a **Broadside** in 1779, Thomas Jefferson's *BILL for establishing* RELIGIOUS FREEDOM — drafted in 1777 — was introduced into the Virginia Assembly on June 13, 1779. It aroused such opposition that passage was delayed until January 16, 1786. The Virginia Bill paved the way for the first Amendment to the United States Constitution. It provided for the most sweeping guarantee of freedom of conscience in history — according to Pope John Paul II, “the foundation for all other human rights.” Appropriately called “a hinge between ages,” the Virginia Statute is considered “the most important document in American History bar none.”

Jefferson called for a “wall of separation between church and state” because the Clergy was plotting with the Federalists to establish “a particular form of Christianity throughout the United States.” “In opposition to their schemes,” Jefferson wrote, “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” In his eagerness to protect all religions, Jefferson attended church services in the halls of Congress and other public places throughout his two terms as President. He said he was “against all maneuvers to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another.” Instead, Jefferson encouraged differing faiths to worship in public spaces, believing that people would discover common principles enabling them “to get along.”

“The Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom ... met with opposition, but, with some mutilations in the preamble,* it was finally passed and a singular proposition proved that its protection of opinion was meant to be universal. Where the preamble declares that coercion [of body and mind] is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by inserting the words ‘Jesus Christ,’ so that it should read, ‘a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion.’ The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to [protect] the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.”

— Thomas Jefferson 1821

*some mutilations in the preamble are preserved in red type

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