

VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

(authored by Thomas Jefferson, 1777; adopted by Virginia House of Delegates, 1786)

1 Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by
2 temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits
3 of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our
4 religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by
5 coercions on either, as it was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious
6 presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being
7 themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of
8 others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and
9 infallible, and as such endeavouring to impose them on others, hath established and
10 maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that
11 to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions
12 which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this
13 or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable
14 liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor, whose morals he would make
15 his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is
16 withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an
17 approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and
18 unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no
19 dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or
20 geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence
21 by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument,
22 unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously
23 of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow-citizens he has
24 a natural right; that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to
25 encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those
26 who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal
27 who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait
28 in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of
29 opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of
30 their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty,

31 because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of
32 judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square
33 with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil
34 government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against
35 peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself,
36 that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the
37 conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument
38 and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict
39 them:

40 Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or
41 support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced,
42 restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on
43 account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and
44 by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in
45 no wise diminish enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

46 And though we well know that this assembly elected by the people for the ordinary
47 purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding
48 assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this
49 act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do
50 declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if
51 any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such
52 act shall be an infringement of natural right.