



James Madison



Thomas Jefferson

Religious Freedom in a Republic of Conscience

The American Revolution is typically perceived as a struggle for political independence and the right of self-government. Resolutions, pamphlets and street protests expressed this right and mobilized a public consensus to fight a war against the mightiest empire in the world at that time. Historians are now discovering how the principles used to justify this battle for political independence were used subsequently by the new state governments to improve economic opportunities and begin a movement towards political and social equality. Less obvious are the measures that several state legislatures took to separate churches from governmental support and protect religious freedom. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison led an historic political battle to have *The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom* approved by the Virginia Legislature in 1786. This law declared 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 nowise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities."

Why is this precedent-setting freedom so important, and how is such freedom essential to the emergence of a world culture? First, if religion is believed to express truths that are sacred, should we not keep them free of the profane politics whereby governments typically debate decisions? Political debate is not designed to express ineffable religious ideas. Even to speak of

sacred truths in secular debates is to muddy their character. When governments attempt to establish or enforce particular religious doctrines and practices and ostracize others, they assume an authority ill suited to the knowledge and the purposes of political authority. What special knowledge do legislatures have to make religious distinctions and impede the free investigation into truths purported to be divine in source and character? Also, if religious organizations get involved in politics, they risk, as Roger Williams the founder of Rhode Island pointed out, the purity of their distinctive mission.

Secondly, secular laws contain the threat of coercion, which is always antithetical to religious pursuit. Religion is the fruit of a search both intellectual and experimental. Such a search is a fundamental freedom for every human being or a "natural right" in the language of the 18th century. Introducing a pressure of coercion or conformity aborts the integrity and creative aspect to such a search. The Virginia Act claims that "Almighty God has created the mind free" and that all attempts to influence it by "temporal punishments or burdens, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness." This is particularly damaging if religion is seen as the source of moral commitments which must be self-chosen if they are to have meaning and value. The process of individuation that religion may provide for some can be a parallel component of the ideal of self definition expressed in the ideology of the American Revolution. If America is to become the land of free and self-defined individuals governed by conscience, surely that opportunity must include a freedom so fundamental to individual integrity as religious freedom. This includes the freedom to reject religious beliefs and make alternative affirmations of what one regards as most true and real and worthy of mental and moral commitments.

Thirdly, freethinking, confident individuals are more likely to become tolerant members of a community. Diversity becomes not a threat but a teacher. The views of others contribute to the breadth and depth of public dialogue when tolerance and trust encourage sincere listening. The Founders of the American Republic had faith in the power of reason to discover consensus amid a diversity of viewpoints, but dogmatic authority had no place in that process. Instead participants in public dialogue needed to rely on philosophical concepts of justice, equality and the common good as well as the "moral sense" that Jefferson spoke of. Articulation and application of such concepts could be nourished by a variety of religious beliefs and philosophical principles without resorting to a

sectarian absolutism. Thereby authentic religious commitment is consistent with responsible citizenship and can sustain participation in the complex process of building consensus for the goals and values of a community.

Might not this faith in constructive dialogue nourished by freely chosen and rationally understood principles contribute to the emergence of a world culture? Surely thoughtful participation in a global dialogue about human needs and values requires the development of the human potential to think, make moral choices, empathize and cooperate with a great diversity of people. Religious freedom when linked with creative imagination and tolerance can be a source of guidance for discussion about the priorities of a community of mankind. Since religious sectarianism and coerced conformity have been such a prevalent source of violence and war historically, it is imperative that the moral and practical necessity of religious freedom be recognized. Thereby all members of the human community can freely seek their self-defined individuality; the ideal of a Republic of Conscience that the Founding Brothers envisioned but could not instantiate in their lifetimes could serve as a foundation stone in the world culture of the future.

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