

January 15, 2016

Dear Member of Congress,

This weekend, the United States will celebrate Religious Freedom Day 2016, which marks the 230th anniversary of the Virginia General Assembly's adoption of the landmark Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. This Statute, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and adopted in part thanks to advocacy by James Madison, provided the basis for the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects several foundational rights including freedom of religion.

We write as a diverse coalition of national religious, secularist and other organizations that advance religious freedom, to urge you to support the core principles emphasized within this Statute, and reflected in the First Amendment. These principles include two in particular that we deeply value.

- **Civil rights for all, regardless of individual religious beliefs:** "Our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."
- **Robust freedom of religion, belief and expression:** "All men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion."

Jefferson and Madison believed—as did others involved in drafting and adopting the Statute and First Amendment—that religious freedom is a fundamental and expansive right.

It is a *fundamental* right because each human being is endowed with a conscience, to which they alone have access and control. Government cannot coerce its people to change, abandon or adopt religious beliefs. It must respect that America is a nation comprised of individuals of varied and different religious and philosophical backgrounds; each person has the right to hold their own theological and moral views.

As a consequence, public policies, which apply to everyone, should refrain from favoring particular religions, or privileging religion over non-religion. They must not force individuals to face restrictions on their liberties, nor experience discrimination based on others' religious beliefs. They must not stifle a person's ability to believe and practice religion as they wish. They also must not force citizens to subsidize religious teachings in any way.

Religious freedom is also an *expansive* right. It does not just concern the question of the proper relationship between religion and government; it gets at the foundational question of the kind of government we would like to have.

Some members of Congress, as well some political candidates, continue to suggest that “religious freedom” means that all individuals have the right to live out their faith or beliefs *without limit*. In recent years, we have seen private businesses that serve the public seek the right to use religion to discriminate. Some of these proponents go so far as to argue that houses of worship and religiously-affiliated charitable organizations should be able to receive taxpayer funding while advancing religious values with those funds. We believe deeply in religious freedom for all individuals, but do not support the right of *some* individuals to impose their religious beliefs on all others. Laws and policies that privilege such imposition do not protect the right of other people—some of whom may work at houses of worship or religiously affiliated organizations—to exercise their legal rights, which include freedom from religion.

There is a way forward. *True* religious freedom means that the same right which protects the liberty of a Christian to pray, attend services and promote their views in public, also protects the right of a non-theist to *not* support religious organizations, and to oppose such entities publicly. Further, it protects the right of a person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) to access public goods without fearing or facing discrimination based on religious belief; the right of a woman to make personal decisions about her reproductive health, based on her own religious or moral views, without interference; and every person’s right from having their tax dollars funneled to religious organizations or schools to impose their religious doctrine on others.

This is what Jefferson and Madison would have wanted, and it is what most individuals in America want their government to protect. We urge you to reject a narrow, sectarian view of religious freedom, and instead support the necessary secular and pluralistic foundation and spirit of the US government. We urge you to protect true religious freedom for all individuals and families nationwide.