

More than two hundred years ago, a group of men met here in Fredericksburg to discuss the relationship of the church and state in Virginia. In a sense their dialogue is continuing even today, whenever Americans discuss and debate the extent of the separation of church and state, and what requirements and limitations it imposes on our public life. But we know that we can take the basic principle that the church and the state should be separate for granted. We know we are debating the details. But in the middle of the eighteenth century

the separation of church and state was an extraordinarily radical idea.

It may have been an historical accident that Jefferson and the other members of the group met here in Fredericksburg. But it was certainly appropriate that they did, because in the last quarter of the eighteenth century Fredericksburg lay along a fault line in the religious life of Virginia.

To the east, in the tidewater, the Church of England, soon to be reorganized as the Episcopal

Church, was still the dominant religious denomination. It was consistently the faith of the great planters who dominated the region.

To the west, in the piedmont counties, upstart Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches were recruiting an increasingly large share of members. Fredericksburg lay along the line between the two. So it was appropriate that the historical events that led to the passage of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom in 1786 passed through our city — which was a

meeting place for people whose views were becoming increasingly diverse.

Jefferson regarded the passage of his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, which grew from the meeting in Fredericksburg, as one of the most important achievements of his public life, comparable to his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and more important, from his point of view, than his two terms as president of the United States. Americans have always acknowledged the importance of religious liberty.

But it is not always clear why Jefferson and so many of the other Founding Fathers felt so passionately about religious freedom, or why Jefferson regarded the adoption of the Virginia Statute as one of three most important events of his life.

Virginians had experienced very little that might be called religious oppression or persecution during Jefferson's lifetime. Before the American Revolution people were required to conform outwardly to the practices of the Church of England, but official conformity consisted of little more than

appearing in church once or twice a year and paying taxes to support the minister and maintain the church — taxes which for most people were fairly nominal. No concerted effort had been made to suppress religious dissent. Why, we should ask, did Jefferson feel that establishing religious liberty in law was so important, when a fair degree of religious liberty already existed in practice, and seemed to be increasing?

For Jefferson and the other Founders the Virginia Statute represented the triumph of a principle — not just the principle

that people should enjoy liberty of conscience, but the principle of equality itself. They reasoned that without religious liberty, true equality — the self-evident principle proclaimed so boldly in the Declaration of Independence — could not be supported. The triumph of religious liberty was, for them, the triumph of the idea that all people are created equal. It was, indeed, a cornerstone of equality.

For thousands of years, enforced religious orthodoxy had been an essential foundation of monarchical governments. These

governments contended that specific religious principles were essential to the survival of government and good order in society, precisely because governments based their authority on those religious principles. People were forced to conform to established, official religions because the powers of the state rested on the principles enunciated in their official doctrines. Kings invariably rested their claims to authority on the will of God, which they asserted had elevated them to be a ruler over others.



The American Revolution categorically and entirely rejected the idea that God had chosen anyone to rule over men. At the end of his career Jefferson summed up the events he had witnessed by writing that he was pleased to have lived through a time when "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

The “palpable truth” of which Jefferson spoke was the universal equality of mankind. The United States was to be governed, not on the basis of any religious principle, but on the free consent of the governed, who entered into a contract with one another to be governed by law.

Jefferson saw that for governments to be based on the principle of equality, absolute religious freedom was essential. In his most famous formulation of this right, Jefferson explained that because American government

was not to be based on any religious truth, no man could consider it an injury if his neighbor said there were twenty gods, or no God at all. Such principles, Jefferson wrote, neither picked anyone's pocket nor broke anyone's leg — that is, they did no injury to property or persons, and thus had to be regarded as entirely benign — at least so far as government was concerned.

Jefferson did not argue that we have to agree with someone who says there are twenty gods, or no God at all. Indeed he championed our right to dispute this view. But

he insisted that such opinions, on either side, are irrelevant to the state, and are opinions about which the state should never become involved.

The wisdom of this view is plain. For government to say that the opinion that there are twenty gods is false, the government must first embrace some official opinion about the existence and nature of God. In other words, the government must take a side in a difference of opinion about religious revelation — it must conclude that some people have access to a truth about God that

others do not. This, Jefferson and other Founders foresaw, would lead to the establishment of all kinds of legal inequalities, as it had since time immemorial.

The separation of church and state has saved Virginia, and the United States, from the bitter sectarian rivalries and religious conflicts that have torn other nations. And it has not, as some of Jefferson's contemporaries predicted and many feared, led the American people to become unusually immoral or irreligious.

Many Virginians believed that the separation of church and state would lead to a gradual withering of organized churches. Jefferson himself believed that within a few decades few formal Christian denominations would survive in the new nation.

But no prediction of Jefferson's ever proved more wrong. By the time Jefferson died in 1826, Virginia was home to an increasing diversity of religious denominations, and was in the grips of the greatest religious revival in American history.

Far from discouraging denominational diversity, strong church life, and individual spiritual commitment, the separation of church and state and the principle of religious liberty actually fostered a deeper and more meaningful commitment to spiritual life.

Two hundred and fifteen years after the passage of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, Americans are the most deeply religious people in the industrialized world. And Virginians, it might surprise Jefferson to learn, are among the

most deeply religious people in America — proof enough, if any is needed, to convince the world that state support is entirely unnecessary for religion to flourish.

Today, the people of the United States represent a greater diversity of religious groups, and hold a greater diversity of religious opinions, than any people on Earth. Yet we live together in peace, and with rare exceptions we treat one another's religious opinions with respect.



Jefferson might be surprised at the strength of our churches and the commitment that so many Americans have to their religious principles. But he would be pleased to see that we have preserved the principle of religious freedom, and that we cherish equality as deeply as any people in the history of the world.