



Thomas Jefferson, Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, was a forerunner of the First Amendment, which guarantees the free exercise of religion.

◀ Jefferson first drafted this document in 1777, and the Virginia legislature passed it in 1786.

Reading and Vocabulary Support

- ① Something that is temporal has to do with earthly life.
- ② Civil incapacitations are disadvantages a citizen might face.
- ③ To be compelled is to be forced.
- ④ Civil capacities refer to the ability of a citizen to participate in the political process. See the related phrase in Item 2, *civil incapacitations*.

Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal ① punishments or burthens [burdens], or by civil incapacitations ② tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, . . . Be it enacted by General Assembly that no man shall be compelled ③ 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. ④ 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.

Analyzing Primary Sources

Cite specific evidence from the document to support your answers.

1. **Vocabulary: Determine Meaning** What phrase in this document means that no one should be forced to attend a church?
2. **Compare and Contrast** Jefferson also drafted the Declaration of Independence. What principle, or “truth,” that appears in the Declaration can also be found in this Statute of Religious Freedom?