

January 15, 2016

United States Senate  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC

Dear Members of Congress,

This weekend, the United States will celebrate Religious Freedom Day 2016, which marks the 230<sup>th</sup> 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 three 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.”
- **Proper boundaries between religion and government:** “No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever.”

Jefferson and Madison believed—as did others involved in drafting and adopting the statute and the 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 to their liberties, nor to experience discrimination based on others' religious beliefs. Public policies 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 speaks to 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 that protects the liberty of a Christian to pray, attend services and promote their views in public, also protects the right of a nontheist 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. It protects a woman's right to make personal decisions about her reproductive health based on her own religious or moral views and without interference. And true religious freedom protects every person's right for their tax dollars not to be funneled to religious organizations or schools that 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.

Sincerely,

American Atheists  
American Humanist Association  
Americans for Religious Liberty  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
Catholics for Choice  
Center for Inquiry  
CORPUS  
DignityUSA  
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America Inc.  
Institute for Science and Human Values  
Keshet  
Medical Students for Choice  
MergerWatch  
Methodist Federation for Social Action  
Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health  
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund  
National Organization for Women  
New Ways Ministry  
Political Research Associates  
Religious Institute  
Reproductive Health Access Project  
Reproductive Health Technologies Project  
Secular Coalition for America  
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

*For additional information or to discuss this issue further, please contact Glenn Northern at 202-986-6093 or [gnorthern@catholicsforchoice.org](mailto:gnorthern@catholicsforchoice.org) AND Michael De Dora at 202-629-2403, ext. 201 or [mdedora@centerforinquiry.net](mailto:mdedora@centerforinquiry.net).*