

January 16, 2018

President of the United States  
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President,

Today, January 16, marks the anniversary of the Virginia General Assembly's adoption of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. This landmark statute, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and championed by James Madison, provided the basis for the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects several foundational rights—including freedom of religion. As a nation, we commemorate this fundamental document by celebrating January 16 as Religious Freedom Day.

We the undersigned members of the Coalition for Liberty & Justice represent a diverse coalition of religious and secular organizations including organizations dedicated to civil rights, LGBTQ equality and reproductive health, rights and justice united to advance a religious freedom that eschews discrimination and respects every individual's right to moral decision making no matter their beliefs. Religious freedom respects the rights of all, not just those with influence and power, and allows a multitude of beliefs to flourish. It must include both freedom of religion and freedom from religion; the ability to believe and practice as a person sees fit as well as the freedom not to have another's beliefs forced upon them. It is an aspirational and inspirational goal at the heart of our nation.

We write today, on this Religious Freedom Day, to urge you to support the core principles emphasized within the Virginia statute and reflected in the First Amendment. These principles include three in particular that we deeply value:

**Civil rights for all, regardless of a person's religious (or non-theistic) beliefs:** "Our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."

**Robust freedom of religion, as well as belief and expression:** "All . . . shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion."

**Proper boundaries between religion and government:** "No [one] shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever. . . . To compel a [person] to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical."

Jefferson and Madison believed—as most Americans do now—that religious freedom is an inalienable right that must be safeguarded in order to secure equality. This bedrock value remains central to our national identity.

We believe it is wrong to tell others how best to listen to their own consciences as they make important decisions. It is an absurd misrepresentation of religious freedom to give entire institutions or individuals license to obstruct or coerce the exercise of another's conscience. That religious freedom is being used as a weapon for discrimination rather than a shield for the individual is anathema to us all.

We are therefore deeply troubled by your administration's blatant disregard for the beliefs and consciences of individuals and for your willingness to let some religious and corporate interests run roughshod over the fundamental religious freedom of others. Time and again members of your administration have sought to appease a narrow segment of the population at the expense of many fundamental rights and liberties. Indeed, your disturbing remarks about religious minorities, your portrayal of entire religions as dangerous, your administration's attempts to expand religious exemptions for healthcare and services and your administration's attempts to weaken the Johnson amendment display, at best, a misunderstanding of this important tenet of our democracy. At worst, these actions are an outright hostility towards religious freedom itself.

The proper role of government is to protect the freedom of conscience for all Americans, to be the neutral and uncompromised guarantor of equal rights and treatment under the law. When taxpayer dollars are directed to institutions that engage in discriminatory activity—for instance, refusing to provide contraceptive services to a woman wishing to prevent pregnancy,<sup>i</sup> firing an employee for having a same-sex partner<sup>ii</sup> or overriding patient intentions for end of life care<sup>iii</sup>—then the government is failing a critical function, subverting the true intention of religious freedom and undermining the moral decision making of those whom it should be protecting.

As the thousands who have shared their objections to various regulations and policies put forward by your administration have sought to portray, our collective fear is that we are veering towards abandonment of the foundational principles set out by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and towards a time when “religious freedom” comes to mean that people, either individually or within a community, have the right to act upon their faith or beliefs *without regard for the rights of others who may not share those beliefs*.

We live in pluralistic nation where freedom of religion has allowed a multitude of beliefs, faiths and theistic and non-theistic expressions to thrive. It is critical that we continue to refrain from favoring particular religions or favoring religion over no religion. Our nation safeguards pluralism not by narrowing our visions of human rights or dictating beliefs to others but by affirming religious freedom for all.

True religious freedom means that just as no employer is licensed to impose their beliefs on their employees and limit their ability to access preventive health care, no government agent, shopkeeper or service provider should be able to hinder an LGBT individual’s right to access public goods or services. We also affirm that non-theists are protected by the same standard as religious believers to promote their views in public, to *not* support religious institutions and to oppose them publicly.

This is what Jefferson and Madison saw as a fundamental freedom, and it is what the vast majority of us want protected today. We urge you to reject any view of religious freedom that seeks to encode the religious beliefs of some and undermine the equality of all. Instead, we urge you to support the pluralistic foundation and spirit of the US government put forth in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786 and immortalized in the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

Sincerely,

American Atheists  
American Humanist Association  
Catholics for Choice  
Center for Inquiry  
Center for Reproductive Rights  
DignityUSA  
Keshet  
Medical Students for Choice  
Muslims for Progressive Values  
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health  
National Organization for Women  
New Ways Ministry  
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice  
Religious Institute  
Reproductive Health Access Project  
Secular Coalition for America  
Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation  
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual  
Women's Ordination Conference

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<sup>i</sup> American Civil Liberties Union, *Health Care Denied* (May 2016), [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field\\_document/healthcaredenied.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/healthcaredenied.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Francis DeBernardo, “Fired for Being Gay: Turning Catholics Away from Our Church,” *Conscience*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2014).

<sup>iii</sup> US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (5th ed. 2009) (Directive 24 denies respect for advance medical directives.), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/upload/Ethical-Religious-Directives-Catholic-Health-Care-Services-fifth-edition-2009.pdf>.