

With Sovereign Reverence

Thomas Jefferson Quotes on Religious Liberty

Thomas Jefferson is considered one of the greatest champions of religious liberty in American history. He often wrote of its importance in legislation, speeches, letters and personal reflections. Here are some of his quotes on religious liberty and church-state separation (edited for modern English grammar):

A Wall of Separation

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.”

--Letter to the Danbury Baptists, January 1, 1802

The Powers of Government

“I consider the government of the United States as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline or exercises...I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct its exercises, its discipline, its doctrines, nor of the religious societies that the general government should be invested with the power of effecting any uniformity of time or matter among them. Fasting and praying are religious exercises. The enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has the right to determine for itself the times for these exercise and the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets, and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the Constitution has deposited it.”

--Letter to Rev. Samuel Miller, January 23, 1808

Presidential Authority and Religion

“[E]very one must act according to the dictates of his own reason, and mine tells me that civil powers alone have been given to the President of the U.S. and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.”

--Letter to Rev. Samuel Miller, January 23, 1808

No Provision Dearer

“No provision in our Constitution ought to be dearer to man than that which protects the rights of conscience against the enterprises of civil authority.”

--Letter to the Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church at
New London, Connecticut, February 4, 1809

Ending Religious Intolerance

“I never will, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance or admit a right of inquiry into the religious opinions of others.... We ought with one heart and one hand to hew down the daring and dangerous efforts of those who would seduce the public opinion to substitute itself into that tyranny over religious faith which the laws have so justly abdicated.”

--Letter to Edward Dowse, April 19, 1803

The Inquisition of Public Opinion

“Our laws have applied the only antidote to [religious intolerance], protecting our religious, as they do our civil, rights by putting all on equal footing. But more remains to be done, for although we are free by the law, we are not so in practice. Public opinion erects itself into an inquisition, and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flames of an *Auto-da-fé*.”

--Letter to Mordecai Noah, May 28, 1818
(an *Auto-da-fé* is the public burning of a heretic)

The Reciprocal Right of Choosing

“From the dissensions among Sects themselves arise necessarily a right of choosing and necessity of deliberating to which we will conform. But if we choose for ourselves, we must allow others to choose also, and so reciprocally, this establishes religious liberty.”

--Notes on Religion, 1776

Sinful and Tyrannical

“[T]o compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern...”

--Jefferson's "Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom,"
Adopted January 1786

Civil Rights and Religion

“Our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions...therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to the offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow citizens he has a natural right.”

--Jefferson's "Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom,"
Adopted January 1786

Friends of Religious Freedom

“In reviewing the history of the times through which we have passed, no portion of it gives greater satisfaction, on reflection, than that which presents the efforts of the friends of religious freedom, and the success with which they were crowned. We have solved by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government, and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving everyone to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason, and the serious convictions of his own inquiries.”

--Letter to the Six Baptist Associations Represented at
Chesterfield, Virginia, November 21, 1808

The Whole Course of My Life

“I trust that the whole course of my life has proved me a sincere friend to religious as well as civil liberty.”

--Letter to the Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church at
New London, Connecticut, February 4, 1809

Sworn Upon the Altar of God

“[The pro-establishment clergy] believe that any portion of power confided to me, will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man. But this is all they have to fear from me: and enough, too, in their opinion.”

--Letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800

Preachers, Pulpits and Politics

“I suppose there is not an instance of a single congregation which has employed their preacher for the mixed purposes of lecturing them *from the pulpit* in... principles of Government or in anything but religion exclusively. Whenever, therefore, preachers instead of a lesson in religion [discuss]...the construction of government or the characters or conduct of those administering it, it is a breach of contract, depriving their audience of the kind of service for which they are salaried.”

--Letter to P.H. Wendover, March 13, 1815 (Unsent)

On Choosing a Pastor

“In choosing our pastor we look to his religious qualifications, without inquiring into his physical or political dogmas, with which we mean to have nothing to do.”

--Letter to P.H. Wendover, March 13, 1815 (Unsent)

Religious Hostility in the New World

“The poor Quakers were flying from persecution in England. They cast their eyes on these new countries as asylums of civil and religious freedom; but they found them free only for the reigning sect.”

--Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781-1785

Religious Diversity

“Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion.... Let us reflect that [the world] is inhabited by a thousand millions of people. That these profess probably a thousand different systems of religion. That ours is but one of that thousand.”

--Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781 – 1785

It Does Me No Injury

“The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

--Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781 – 1785

The Most Inalienable and Sacred Right

“The constitutional freedom of religion [is] the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights.”

*--Address to the University of Virginia Board of Visitors
Reprinted October 7, 1822*

Equality in the Eyes of Government

“I am for freedom of religion, and against all maneuvers to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another.”

--Letter to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799

The Example of History

“History, I believe, furnishes no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government. This marks the lowest grade of ignorance, of which their civil as well as religious leaders will always avail themselves for their own purposes.”

--Letter to Alexander von Humboldt, December 6, 1813