

Could not any dictator, totalitarian government, or church say that the teaching of any unpopular, minority religion was an offense against the morals and order of the community? In fact, that has been the custom of rulers throughout history when they wished to suppress the development of a new or unpopular religion. Which morals will be endangered? Obviously, the morals endorsed by the party in power. That is just the charge that was made against the early Christians in Rome by successive emperors. It was the charge made against the Jews by Hitler. It is literally true to say that the qualifying words used in this document, which purports to be a covenant on *human* rights, could be used to destroy religion in every corner of the world.

The American Religious Concept

IN CONTRAST, one of the early — and one of the best — expressions of the American concept of religious liberty is found in the Statute of Religious Freedom of Virginia as written by Thomas Jefferson in 1786:

“Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled 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 opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

“. . . 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.”

This statute came into being because of an effort by certain persons in Virginia to restrict freedom of religion only to the practice of “the Christian religion in general.” To this, because they believed it to be a restriction upon the freedom of religious expression, both Madison and Jefferson were opposed.

In 1785, James Madison had stated in his famous *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*:

“The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. . . . We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man’s right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society, and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance.”