

## **VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**Grade level:** High School

**Type of Lesson:** Document Analysis/Group

**Duration:** 90-minute block

**Goals:** As a result of this study, students will:

- Have understanding of the ideas expressed in the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom;
- Have understanding of the influence of the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom on the Constitution of the United States; and
- Be introduced to working with documents to understand events in history, make past and present connections, and interpret ideas and events from different perspectives.

**Objectives:** As a result of this study, students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Identify and analyze documents, records and data to increase understanding of events;
- Evaluate sources;
- Formulate historical questions based on inquiry and interpretation;
- Communicate findings by presentation;
- Develop skills in discussion and persuasion; and
- Interpret the significance of excerpts from famous speeches and documents.
- **Standard VS.6b**

**Prerequisites:** Students would have read the Virginia Declaration of Rights and Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom prior to this lesson.

**Materials:**

- Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Matching Activity
- Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Discussion Questions
- Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

**Lesson Description:**

In activity 1, students will match sections of the original Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom with the paraphrase sections. This can be done in groups or individually.

In activity 2, arrange students into 4 groups and assign each group a discussion question to which they should form an argument to support their answers.

**Lesson Procedure:** Review the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (attachment 3).

**Activity 1** (20 minutes)

1. Cut apart Attachment 1 (original statute sections 1-8), and then paraphrase sections A-H. This will give you 16 slips of paper to distribute, one to each student.
2. Give time to read. Instruct students to move around room to find the slip that contains the same information they have. A number slip will match to a letter slip.
3. After numbers and letters have found each other, each pair should read both versions. Ask them to decide if the paraphrase is correct. What would they add or remove?
4. Students remain in groups and line up in number order and read paraphrase aloud.
5. Correct sequence for originals and paraphrases: 1G, 2C, 3F, 4B, 5D, 6H, 7A, 8F.

**Activity 2** (60 minutes)

1. Arrange 4 groups and assign a question to each group (attachment 2).
2. Each group should have a leader to keep things moving, a recorder to write down main ideas, a timer to keep schedule, and a reporter to share results with whole class.
3. Give groups 40 minutes for discussions. Teacher walks around as observer.
4. When the time is up, the leader summarizes their argument for the group from the recorded notes (10 minutes). The presenter will represent the group and report results to the class (2 minutes each group).

**Assessment/Evaluation:**

Have students experienced some of the difficulties faced in creating important documents?

Have they made connections between the past and the present? Did they have to make compromises when completing the assignment for presentation? Are they beginning to interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives?

**Notes:**

**ATTACHMENT I**  
**Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom Matching Activity**  
*(Original, in order)*

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1. Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagat it by coercions on either, as it was in his Almighty power to do;

✂-----

2. that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavouring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time;

✂-----

3. that to 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, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind;

✂-----

4. that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to 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;

✂-----

✂-----

5. that it tends only to corrupt the principles of that religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion, and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order;

✂-----

6. and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them:

✂-----

7. 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.

✂-----

8. 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 to be 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 shall be an infringement of natural right.

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**ATTACHMENT I – Part 2**  
**Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom Matching Activity**  
*(Paraphrased, not in order)*

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A. Because of these things, the government of Virginia says that everyone can be whatever religion they want. Everyone can talk about and follow their religion. The government can't bother you or reward you because of what you believe.

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B. Civil rights are separate from religion. It is wrong to use a person's religion to say that they can't be elected or work in the government—everyone has a right to their religion.

✂-----

C. For a long time, there have been politicians and church leaders all over the world who have tried to force their own personal beliefs on people, and this is not a good thing.

✂-----

D. If people lie and say that they are a certain religion that hurts the religion. It is wrong to lie about your religion and it is wrong for the government to make you think you should have to. It is a bad idea for the government to tell people what to believe, because politicians might force their beliefs on the public. The government should just keep the country peaceful.

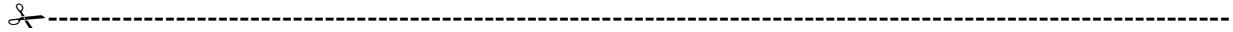
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E. In the future, if the government decides to change or back out of what we said here, they will be doing a bad thing.

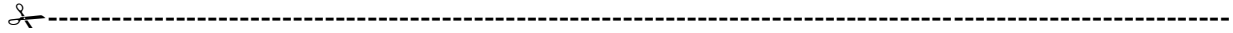
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F. It is wrong to make people pay for things they don't believe in. People should be allowed to support religion however they want to, but the government shouldn't make people do this.

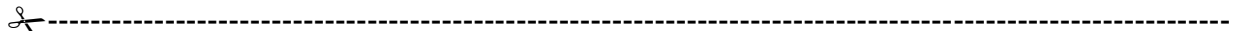
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G. People are born to think freely and have their own opinions. Punishing people to change what they think is wrong; it would just make people lie and be mean, and this is not how people should live.



H. The truth is a good thing. As long as people are free to talk (and disagree) about what they think is true, the truth will come out.



**ATTACHMENT II**  
**Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom**  
**Student Handout: Discussion Questions**

When Jefferson wrote the Statute in 1777, it caused a controversy, and some people said he was an atheist and an enemy of religion.

- A. Put yourself in the place of a church official in 1780 and read the Statute again. Why might you disagree with it?

In 1787, in a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, Jefferson wrote:

*"... shake off all the fears and servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."*

- B. Does this letter to his nephew support this claim that he was an atheist and an enemy of religion? Why or why not?
- C. Do you think Jefferson would be considered an enemy of religion today? Why or why not? Use quotes from the Virginia Statute to support your answer.
- D. In your opinion, are there certain circumstances under which the freedom of religion granted in the Virginia Statute and in the First Amendment should not apply? Why or why not?

## ATTACHMENT III

# Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

*Draft for a Bill to Establish Religious Freedom in Virginia (1779).*

**by Thomas Jefferson**

### Section I.

*W*ell aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time: That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, 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, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to 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; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous falacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge

of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

#### S e c t i o n II.

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact 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 opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

#### S e c t i o n III.

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.