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| Excerpt from Virginia’s *Bill to Establish Religious Freedom (1786)*  Next to the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson took greatest pride in his authorship of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, which, as his friend James Madison said, "extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind."  Jefferson wrote this statute in 1777, when he had returned from the Continental Congress to begin a wholesale revision of Virginia's laws that would eradicate every trace of aristocratic privilege hidden in them. At the time, "the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience" was an established right in Virginia. Yet Jefferson's statute was bitterly opposed and led to what he later called "the severest contest in which I have ever been engaged."  The statute finally passed in 1786, thanks to the political skills of James Madison and only after the assembly had deleted significant portions of Jefferson's original law. Partly as a result of this victory, however, Jefferson gained a reputation as an enemy of religion. Thirty years later he wrote that "the priests indeed have...thought it proper to ascribe to me...anti-religious sentiments...They wished him to be thought atheist deist, or devil, who could advocate freedom from their religious dictations."  Why did Jefferson's defense of religious freedom backfire in this way? Read this excerpt from Jefferson's statute, which shows the main sections crossed out by the Virginia assembly in parentheses. Then try to answer the questions below.  **Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom** (Well 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...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...[who] have assumed dominion over the faith of others...hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world;...(that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction;)...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.   1. How did the assembly's deletions limit Jefferson's conception of religious freedom? How did their changes limit his conception of the mind's freedom? 2. Why would religious officials feel threatened by Jefferson's statute? What attitude does he express toward churches and church doctrine? What role does he provide for ministers and churches in an individual's religious life? 3. What is the "truth" Jefferson believes will prevail when left to itself? What truth does Jefferson himself believe in? Would he be considered an enemy of religion today? |