



CORRESPONDENT OF THE DAY

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Religious Freedom Allows Intolerant Beliefs

Editor, Times-Dispatch:

John Schuiteman's letter, "Thank Goodness for Religious Freedom," suggests that Jefferson and Madison intended the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom to create a uniformly tolerant and "un-arrogant" set of religious beliefs and religions. That is not, in fact, what the Statute called for, nor was it the problem of intolerance of absolutist belief that Jefferson and Madison were addressing. They were circumscribing the relation of civil government to religions and increasing the range of individual freedom of conscience.

The Statute provided that individuals "shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion." The Statute was not an attempt to create a polite and respectful world; the authors sought freedom -- specifically, freedom from government intrusion into matters of religion.

In our country today government is restrained while individuals are free (within limits) to exercise their own religious convictions -- even if they are offensive to others. The government cannot stop the Jehovah's Witness from going door to door, nor can it prevent students from meeting at the flagpole to pray before school.

Our freedom is the freedom to disagree, as Schuiteman apparently does. At the same time, however, he stereotypes and insults both the "arrogant mindset" of the vicar of St. Rita's Catholic Church and the young Muslims who "seemingly check their brains at the door."

It is this kind of stereotyping and intolerance of religious difference that poses the greater threat to a peaceful and religiously plural world. Stereotyping and generalizations serve only to increase fear, to inspire discrimination, and ultimately, to curtail freedom. We must move beyond fear to disagreement and civil discourse, and I think Jefferson and Madison would agree.

Isabelle Kinnard. Richmond.

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