

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?