
Presidential Documents

Title 3—

Proclamation 6862 of January 12, 1996

The President

Religious Freedom Day, 1996

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On this day over 200 years ago, Virginia's General Assembly passed a law that created the first legal protection for religious freedom in this country. Introducing his bill to the Virginia Assembly, Thomas Jefferson stated that he was not creating a new right confined simply to the State of Virginia or to the United States, but rather declared religious liberty to be one of the "natural rights of mankind" that should be shared by all people. Jefferson's language was shepherded through the legislature by James Madison, who later used it as a model for the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Americans have long benefited from our founders' wisdom, and the Constitution's twin pillars of religious liberty—its protection of the free exercise of religion and its ban on the establishment of religion by the Government—have allowed an enormous diversity of spiritual beliefs to thrive throughout our country. Today, more than 250,000 churches, synagogues, mosques, meeting houses, and other places of worship serve to bring citizens together, strengthening families and helping communities to keep their faith traditions alive. We must continue to ensure full protection for religious liberty and help people of different faiths to find common ground.

Our Nation's profound commitment to religious freedom reminds us that many people around the world lack the safeguard of law to protect them from prejudice and persecution. We deplore the religious intolerance that too often tears neighbor from neighbor, and we must remain an international advocate for the ideal of human brotherhood and sisterhood and for the basic rights that sustain human dignity and personal freedom. Let us pledge our support to all who struggle against religious oppression and rededicate ourselves to fostering peace among people with divergent beliefs so that what Americans experience as a "natural right" may be enjoyed by individuals and societies everywhere.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, WILLIAM J. CLINTON, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 1996, as Religious Freedom Day. I call upon the people of the United States to observe this day with appropriate ceremonies, activities, and programs, and I urge all Americans to reaffirm their devotion to the fundamental principles of religious freedom and religious tolerance.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twelfth day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-six, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twentieth.

