

Title 3—

Proclamation 7162 of January 14, 1999

The President

Religious Freedom Day, 1999

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

On Religious Freedom Day we commemorate a landmark achievement in the history of our Nation: the adoption in 1786 by the Virginia legislature of a religious freedom statute. This historic legislation, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and co-sponsored by James Madison, was designed to prevent religious discrimination and to protect Virginians from pressure to join or support any church. It served as the model for the First Amendment of our Constitution, the guarantee of freedom of religion that has beckoned so many people fleeing persecution to seek sanctuary in this land.

Americans are a deeply religious people, and our right to worship as we choose, to follow our own personal beliefs, is the source of much of our Nation's strength. Our churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other houses of worship are centers of community service and community life. They preserve and promote the values and religious traditions that have infused our efforts to build a civil society based on mutual respect, compassion, and generosity. They provide our children with the moral compass to make wise choices.

America's reverence for religious freedom and religious tolerance has saved us from much of the hatred and violence that have plagued so many other peoples around the world. We have always been vigilant in protecting this freedom, but our efforts cannot stop at our own shores. We cannot ignore the suffering of men and women across the globe today who are harassed, imprisoned, tortured, and executed simply for seeking to live by their own beliefs. Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right that must be upheld by every nation and guaranteed by every government. The promotion of religious freedom for all peoples must continue to serve as a central element of our foreign policy.

Reflecting our steadfast commitment to this goal, last fall the Congress passed, and I was proud to sign into law, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This legislation enhances our ability to advance freedom of religion for men and women of all faiths throughout the world. It also establishes a new position at the Department of State—the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom—to ensure that religious liberty concerns receive consistent and appropriate attention at the highest policy-making levels.

On Religious Freedom Day, let us give thanks for this precious right that has so profoundly shaped and sustained our Nation, and let us strengthen our efforts to share its blessings with oppressed peoples 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, 1999, 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 fourteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-third.

William Clinton

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