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LEADERSHIP EDUCATION ADVANCING
DEMOCRACY & DIVERSITY
A PROJECT OF INTERFAITH ALLIANCE

Voices of Reason: Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, greatly influenced by 18th century Enlightenment values (liberty and equality are the natural rights of men endowed by their creator), was fiercely committed to the cause of religious liberty, including the right to be an atheist. His greatest concern was protecting citizens *from* the dictates of organized religion. He greatly feared that in a state with an established religion, those outside the religious mainstream would lose the opportunity to hold appointed office. Jefferson considered the battle for religious freedom in Virginia, which began in 1776, as the “severest contest in which I have ever been engaged.” (Church 45-46)

Directions: Read the introduction to and the contents of the “Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom” found in Chapter 8 of Forrest Church’s The Separation of Church and State, pages 72-77. First drafted by Jefferson in 1779, this Statute did not win passage by the Virginia House of Delegates for seven years (until early in 1786). Yet Thomas Jefferson considered this document to be one of his most significant lifetime accomplishments. It became the model for virtually every other state-sponsored affirmation of religious liberty for years to come.

Be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Describe the person and historical context of this individual who is promoting the idea of religious liberty.
2. What arguments does the individual make for religious liberty?
3. What limits, if any, does this person place on the practice of religious liberty?