



Religious Freedom Week, 1989

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Our Nation's commitment to the principle of religious liberty has not only been enshrined in law but also faithfully upheld by generations of Americans. The first men and women to settle in America came to this country in search of the opportunity to worship God freely. Since then, this country has been a haven for millions of people seeking refuge from religious persecution. Indeed, in our pluralistic society, where the adherents of different religions must live together along with others who profess no religion at all, toleration has been a practical necessity as well as a moral imperative. This week, we acknowledge the importance of religious freedom and tolerance to each American and to our entire Nation.

The most celebrated guarantee of religious liberty in U.S. law is contained in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Yet even before the First Amendment was written, the Constitution provided that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." The leaders who shaped our system of government were men of great faith and foresight—and they recognized the various dangers government could pose to individual liberty and the free exercise of religious beliefs.

Before the Constitution was drafted, the State of Virginia provided, in a statute drafted by Thomas Jefferson, "that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities." Jefferson considered his authorship of this statute so important that he chose to have it noted in his epitaph.

Throughout the history of the United States, the free exercise of religion has contributed not only to the welfare of individual believers but also to the strength of our Nation. The American people's faith in God—unencumbered by legal restrictions and untainted by government interference—has been a powerful force for maintaining high standards of morality and justice in our society. Because bigotry and indifference pose an ever-present danger to religious liberty everywhere, toleration must be for us not just a matter of legal decree binding the government, but a matter of moral conviction enjoining each of us to respect the rights and beliefs of others.

Tragically, in many nations—especially those that suffer under the dark shadow of totalitarian rule—the rights of believers are systematically denied. And in too many countries around the world, animosities and hatreds often lead to civil unrest or violence. Thus, we Americans should be thankful for the religious freedom we so enjoy and also remain fully committed to defending this fundamental human right any time, any place, it is threatened or denied.

Nearly 200 years ago, in his now famous reply to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, President Washington declared that the Government of the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." This week, let us rededicate ourselves—as individuals and as a Nation—to that noble vision.

In recognition of the importance of religious freedom and the spirit of tolerance, the Congress, by Senate Joint Resolution 146, has designated the week beginning September 24, 1989, as "Religious Freedom Week."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE BUSH, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim the week beginning September 24, 1989, as Religious Freedom Week. I call upon the people of the United States to observe this week with appropriate ceremonies and activities, and I urge them to reaffirm their devotion to the principles of religious freedom.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-seventh day of September, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and fourteenth.

George Bush