

Jefferson's Correspondence with the Danbury Baptists



For additional context: <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danbury.html>

NOTE: *Although the Bill of Rights prohibited the federal government from establishing a state religion, it didn't prohibit the states from maintaining established churches. Connecticut continued to maintain an established church until 1818. The Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut's correspondence with Jefferson expresses their frustration with being a religious minority in a state with an established church.*

The address of the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut, assembled October 7, 1801.
To Thomas Jefferson, Esq., President of the United States of America

Sir,

Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your election to office, we embrace the first opportunity... to express our great satisfaction in your appointment to the Chief Magistracy in the United States....

Our sentiments are uniformly on the side of religious liberty: that Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals, that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious opinions, [and] that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor....

Sir, we are sensible that the President of the United States is not the National Legislator and also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the laws of each State, but our hopes are strong that the sentiment of our beloved President... will shine and prevail through all these States--and all the world--until hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the earth... May God strengthen you for the arduous task which providence and the voice of the people have called you--to sustain and support you and your Administration against all the predetermined opposition of those who wish to rise to wealth and importance on the poverty and subjection of the people.

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.

Jefferson's Reply (January 1, 1802)

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction...

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, **I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.** Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th Jefferson
Jan. 1. 1802.