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## Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association 1802

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*Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) wrote this epistle in late 1801 and early 1802 as a response to a letter that was both congratulatory (on his election in 1800) and petitionary (asking for a statement of support on religious liberty) from the Danbury Baptist Association. It is generally thought that since letters received from Presidents in this era were published in local newspapers, Jefferson wrote the letter as a way to clarify some issues on which he had been attacked by the opposition Federalist Party—namely, the charge of “atheism.”*

*Although the letter disappeared from the public arena shortly after it was written, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the ideas contained in the letter came to be the standard legal interpretation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment, and many Americans began to use the metaphor of “separation” as if it were written into the Constitution. This change came about in part because the letter was taken to be an authoritative pronouncement of one of the most important Founding Father’s views on religion and the state. Jefferson wrote two drafts of the letter, and asked for advice on the letter from two of his advisors. As such, the letter is viewed as a thoughtful and elegant account of Jefferson’s opinions on the relationship between religion and the federal government. —David Budiash*

Bibliography: Robert S. Alley, ed. *The Supreme Court on Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Daniel Driesbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

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To messrs. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

[1] 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. My duties dictate a faithful and zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

[2] 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.

[3] 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

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**Discussion Questions:**

1. In paragraph 2, Jefferson quoted the First Amendment and then gave an interpretation of it (“wall of separation”). To what extent do Jefferson’s words accurately (or inaccurately) interpret the First Amendment?
2. Describe the argument for religious freedom that Jefferson outlined in paragraph 2. How did Jefferson link American constitutional principles with his argument for religious freedom?

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SOURCE: “Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists: The Final Letter, as Sent,” *LC Information Bulletin*, June 1998, Library of Congress, <<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>>. Paragraph numbers have been added.

[This text was created by David Budiash as part of the “Documenting American History” project, supervised by Professor David Voelker at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. This project had support from UWGB’s Research Council.]



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