To Thomas Jefferson, Esq.,
President of the United States of America

Sir,

... 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—that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbors; But, sir, our constitution of government is not specific. Our ancient charter together with the law made [at that time], were adopted as the basis of our government, at the time of our revolution; and such had been our laws and usages, and such still are; that religion is considered as the first object of legislation; and therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the state) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights; and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen...

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 sentiments of our beloved president, which have had such genial effect already, like the radiant beams of the sun, will shine and prevail through all these states and all the world, till hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the earth. Sir, when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America’s God has raised you up to fill the chair of state out of that goodwill which he bears to the millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for your arduous task which providence and the voice of the people have called you to sustain and support you enjoy administration against all the predetermined opposition of those who wish to raise 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.

Signed in behalf of the association,

Nehemiah Dodge
Ephraim Robbins
Stephen S. Nelson

Directions: Read the following documents and respond to the questions.

Gentlemen

... 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.

Jan. 1. 1802.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the Danbury Baptists’ view of religious liberty in your own words.

2. Does Jefferson agree or disagree with the Baptists’ view of religious liberty?

3. Is there any significance in the fact that Jefferson based his arguments on a theological assertion and/or that he closed his letter with a prayer?

4. Thomas Jefferson considered himself a champion of religious freedom. Before he became President, he had led his home state of Virginia to disestablish religion. He wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Why do you think he did not address the Baptists’ concerns about problems of state establishment?

5. What does Jefferson say is the “legitimate” reach of government? What does this mean? What do you believe would have been Jefferson’s response to the Robert H. Jackson quotation?