

Chris Bergeron, 8th grade student

Essex Middle School, Essex,
Vermont

“That all persons have a natural and unalienable right, to worship Almighty God, according to the dictates of their own consciences and understandings, as in their opinion shall be regulated by the word of God; and that no person ought to, or of right can be compelled to attend any religious worship, or erect or support any place of worship, or maintain any minister, contrary to the dictates of conscience, nor can any person be justly deprived or abridged of any civil right as a citizen, on account of religious sentiments, or peculiar mode of religious worship; and that no authority can, or ought to be vested in, or assumed by, any power whatever, that shall in any case interfere with, or in any manner control the rights of conscience, in the free exercise of religious worship. Nevertheless, every sect or denomination of Christians ought to observe the Sabbath or Lord’s day, and keep up some sort of religious worship, which to them shall seem most agreeable to the revealed will of God.”

-Article III of the Vermont Constitution

Over two hundred years have passed since the adoption of this passage as part of Vermont’s Constitution. That amount of time, alone, makes it impossible to know the true intentions of the document’s authors. That is almost immaterial though, because what we do have are these words, and over the last two hundred years we have interpreted them as best we know, and most Vermonters live their lives to the standards they set. Although many might not be able to quote this passage, and many don’t know where it is written, nearly all Vermonters take these rights for granted and know they possess them. Religious freedoms were just as important to the writers of this document as they are to us now, but they were much harder to obtain. We may not know it, but we are lucky to have religious freedoms play such large roles in our lives.

When the constitution was written, in 1793, separation of church and state and freedom of religion were hard things to come by, compared to our society. The Bill of Rights had just been passed two years prior and most Americans were not yet used to the fact that any religion could be practiced without persecution or retribution. Although many of the early settlers in the colonies were seeking religious freedom, they considered any religion other than their own to be unholy and treated it as if it didn't deserve equal recognition. They had come to America looking to set up a government based on religion. Vermont, however, had guaranteed its citizens religious freedom since the Constitution of 1777 when Vermont was still an independent entity. Over two hundred years later these rights are still contested and challenged which is a testament to their importance.

In a culture where school prayer isn't allowed and the capitol has a "holiday tree" as opposed to a "Christmas tree," it may seem as if religious freedoms aren't critical to our society. The truth is, however, that the rights granted to us by our state and federal constitutions are constantly being challenged. In some areas of Vermont, rural towns, that don't have their own schools, pay tuition for students to attend public or private schools. In 1961 The Vermont Supreme Court ruled that a town couldn't pay tuition for a student at a religious school. In 1996 the Chittenden School Board voted to pay tuition for students at Mt. St. Josephs Academy, a religious school. When the state threatened to withhold educational funding, the School Board sued the state and ultimately lost. In other states statues depicting the Ten Commandments have been removed from courthouses after lengthy legal battles. These examples and more illustrate

the fact that if freedom of religion wasn't expressly guaranteed in our state and federal constitutions then there is a chance we would have those freedoms at all.

The intentions of the writers of the constitution become clearer when one considers the specific language they used to express our rights. Lacking supplementary knowledge, it is clear that the framers of this document undoubtedly intended for the people of Vermont to experience religious freedom. Without this intent it is possible that over the past two hundred years we would have lost those freedoms. Religious freedom is just as important today as it was in 1793, and most Vermonters know that.