

George Washington and Religious Freedom

Summary

This lesson plan asks students to analyze two primary sources, in the form of letters, that address the issues relating to religious freedom for the newly formed United States and its relation to the nature of citizenship and equality in a religiously diverse society. Students will also analyze the 1st Amendment and develop an argument regarding 1st amendment issues today.

Time Frame

2 class periods of 70 minutes each

Group Size

Pairs

Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication, Social & Civic Responsibility

Materials

- Letter From Moses Seixas with graphic organizer (see documents)
- Letter from George Washington with graphic organizer (see documents)
- Martha Minow Video Clip (see Websites)
- Discussion questions and assessment prompt (see documents)
- Writing rubric (see assessments)

Background for Teachers

The Story Behind George Washington's "Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island"

Courtesy of the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom

Back in 1789, the Constitution that we Americans today take so for granted had still not been ratified by all of the Colonies, much less had the First Amendment to the Constitution been adopted. George Washington, in his first presidency, decided to tour all of the New England states that fall of 1789. Today we might consider it a public relations trip. But he didn't visit Rhode Island. Some scholars believe that was because Rhode Island hadn't yet ratified the new Constitution.

By 1790, Rhode Island had finally signed it, so after Congress adjourned that year, President Washington decided he would pay a good-will visit to Rhode Island after all. He took along with him Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and New York Governor George Clinton. They sailed from New York City (then the American capital) in a little packet passenger boat to Newport, where the group spent the night of August 17, 1790.

The next morning, on August 18, notables and officials of that city, and representatives from various religious groups, jockeyed for the honor of reading the president letters of welcome to their city. Among them was one of the officials of the congregation, Moses Seixas, who was allowed to read his letter aloud to the president.

Moses Seixas poured out his heart full of gratitude to George Washington for his leadership in the establishment of a new government. He expressed the hope that this new country would accord all of its citizens respect and tolerance, whatever their background and religious beliefs.

The Seixas letter moved the president. He responded to that letter on August 21, 1790, assuring the Hebrew congregation that "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." This was a very poetic way of saying they would be safe in their

homes and houses of worship.

He also said this would be a country which "gives to bigotry no sanction."

Beginning in 1789, George Washington wrote letters to various religious organizations in this country:

On May 10, 1789 he wrote to the United Baptist churches in Virginia;

That same month, he wrote to the General Assembly of Presbyterian churches;

In September of 1789 he wrote to the annual meeting of the Quakers;

And on August 21 of 1790, on a trip to Rhode Island, as part of his campaign around the colonies to pass what became known as the Bill of Rights, George Washington sent his now famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport.

The tone of this last one was different from the other letters--it was declarative, assertive, and unusually crisp compared with Washington's ordinary style. It was a clarion call that has echoed down through the centuries. Washington promised in his letter not just tolerance, but full liberty of conscience no matter what one's religious beliefs happen to be. He was paving the way for the First Amendment, which would be added to the Constitution on December 15, 1791.

Taken from: <http://nobigotry.facinghistory.org/content/story-behind-washingtons-letter>

Student Prior Knowledge

Language

: Students will need to be familiar with the terms claim, tone, evidence, and point of view. They should also have practiced identifying these in an argument of various kinds.

History: Students should be familiar with the Bill of Rights; Amendment 1 as well as obstacles George Washington faced at the founding of the United States of America.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will analyze the letters and find evidence of principals of religious freedom at the founding of the United States of America.

Students will identify the claim George Washington established in his letter and provide textual evidence for their decision.

Students will discuss the point of view and tone in each letter in small groups and connect their discussion to current 1st Amendment issues.

Students will write a public letter as George Washington that addresses the challenges and needs of religious freedom in an ethnically and religiously diverse society using textual evidence from the primary sources and current events.

Instructional Procedures

1. Bellringer/Intro

: Post the following quote by George Washington, "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." Ask the students to respond to the following questions on paper or with a partner:

To what is the author referring.

What are inherent natural rights?

2. Seixas Analysis

: Hand out the Seixas letter handout. Discuss as a review point of view, tone, claim and evidence. In pairs, have the students conduct a close reading of the letter in order to fill out the graphic organizer at the bottom. discuss the letter as a class focusing on how students completed the graphic organizer.

3. Washington's letter

: Hand out Washington's reply handout. Have students first analyze the letter alone and then

compare their completed graphic organizer with their partners. Finally discuss as a class.

4. Connection

: Watch the video clip of Martha Minow and then post "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Place students in groups of four and have them first address the implications behind the 1st amendment toward religious freedom and determine how Seixas and Washington would have felt toward the 1st amendment based on their letters. Keep students in their groups and handout the discussion questions and prompt. The students should first answer the questions on their own and then discuss them as a group.

Assessment: Have students respond to the prompt and refer to the writing rubric.

Strategies for Diverse Learners

It may be necessary to do the first letter together with teacher scaffolding and the second letter in partners.

Having students do a quick research on current First Amendment issues through the news may also add to understanding and provide more concrete information for the assessment.

Extensions

This lesson could be carried over to a research or argument paper on current First Amendment issues.

Rubrics

[Writing Scoring Guide](#)

Bibliography

Facing History and Ourselves (2011) "Give Bigotry no Sanction" Retrieved from:
<http://nobigotry.facinghistory.org/content/students-write-spirit-george-washington>

Authors

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