Religious Freedom & Democracy

Teaching George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island

George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom

www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry
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George Washington’s 1790 Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island is a landmark in the history of religious freedom in America and part of a founding moment in US history when the country was negotiating how a democracy accommodates differences among its people.

In the United States and globally, recent debates about group identity and immigration overlap with those about faith and citizenship. Today, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, as well as people who belong to no religion, often find themselves living alongside neighbors whose beliefs and practices are quite different from their own. With this new diversity, there is a growing need worldwide to discuss what is necessary for people to live together, including the opportunities and limits of religious freedom in a democracy. These are not easy conversations, and the tone of recent debates about the differences between people suggests that we need to get better at talking about these issues or else risk further polarization.

The classroom resources that follow are designed to help teachers both introduce Washington’s letter into the classroom in historical context and begin to explore with their students the echoes of this powerful statement in the more than two centuries of history since it was written.

The resources below are divided into five readings:

- Reading 1: Newport, 1790
- Reading 2: “With the most cordial affection and esteem”
- Reading 3: Difference and Democracy
- Reading 4: Freedom and Tolerance
- Reading 5: Contemporary Echoes
Each reading begins with a “Creating Context” section that includes questions for reflection and background information designed to enable students to engage deeply with the reading.

Each reading is followed by a “Connections” section that includes questions to help guide students through thoughtful reflection and analysis of the ideas and events presented in the text. These questions also provide an excellent starting point for class discussion and writing assignments.

Each reading is also followed by a “Using” section that includes additional suggestions for exploring the history and ideas described in the reading. These sections are written specifically for the teacher, and they include links to descriptions of specific strategies that will help teachers incorporate the readings into their classes. Facing History and Ourselves’ entire collection of teaching strategies is available online.

Between Readings 4 and 5, you will find a short list of other pivotal moments in the history of religious freedom in the United States, along with links to introductory resources about each topic on the Internet. Teachers are encouraged to explore one or more of these moments from history with their students before completing their work on Washington's letter. This list is by no means comprehensive, so you may choose to include additional examples from history that you or your class finds relevant.

We encourage teachers to adapt the resources and activity suggestions included here to meet their individual classroom needs.
Newport, 1790

On a hot, muggy afternoon, August 17, 1790, George Washington arrived in Newport by packet ship. Three months earlier, after long debates the Rhode Island legislature voted 34-32 to ratify the new federal Constitution, becoming the last state in the union to do so. At the heart of the legislature’s heated debate was the issue of religious freedom in the new nation.

Washington arrived in the seaport town accompanied by a crew of notables, among them his secretary of state Thomas Jefferson, New York governor George Clinton, US Supreme Court justice John Blair, and South Carolina congressman William Loughton Smith. They, in turn, were greeted by Newport’s luminaries—politicians, business leaders, and clergy. Together they gathered on the second floor of a red brick customhouse—then serving as Rhode Island’s state capital—where selected representatives from the community addressed the president. Among them was Moses Seixas, who read two letters that day. He presented the first one as the Grand Master of the Masonic Order of Rhode Island and the second as the warden of the Hebrew congregation in Newport.

It’s hard to imagine just how unusual the situation was in the young nation: a Jew, recognized as one of a community’s civic leaders, reading a public letter to the new president. After all, the families of many of Newport’s Jewish population had come to America to escape centuries of persecution in Europe. Jews had been expelled from England as early as 1290, forced to leave Spain in 1492, and kicked out of Portugal four years later.

Perhaps Moses Seixas’s opportunity to bring greetings to Washington in 1790 could only have happened in Rhode Island. Jewish congregations from other states in the new nation also sent congratulatory messages to Washington, but Rhode Island’s degree of tolerance for religious dissenters was unique. The colony’s founder, Roger Williams, a man considered a heretic by most of his peers, sought refuge in Rhode Island in 1636, as did many other dissenters who
followed him there. King Charles II of England finally granted the colony a charter in 1663. The document promised:

No Person within the said Colony, at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called into question, for any differences in opinion, in matters of religion.

Outside of Rhode Island, freedom of religion for non-Christians in the colonial period was limited. In fact, freedom of religion for some denominations of Christians, including Quakers, Baptists, and Catholics, was often limited and sometimes denied.

At the time of Washington’s visit to Newport, the states were debating the Bill of Rights, with its First Amendment provision that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In fact, one of the reasons for the president’s visit was to gain support for the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Without those provisions, religious minorities questioned whether they would still be allowed to practice their religion. Would they be allowed to build houses of worship? Would they have the same political rights as members of mainstream Protestant denominations? After all, it was within living memory that “heretics” were banished and, on occasion, executed in the former English colonies. In 1790, exclusion from civic participation, including voting and holding office, on the basis of religion still affected Jews, Baptists, Quakers, Catholics, and others in all the 13 original states.

Even tolerant Rhode Island’s promise of free religious practice did not guarantee other civil rights for religious minorities. While Jews were free to worship, do business, and travel, they did not benefit from the political rights that came with citizenship, such as holding public office or voting.

Seixas’s message on behalf of Newport’s small Hebrew congregation reminded President Washington of the precarious historic position of Jews, even as he hopefully described a future in which they were fully accepted as American citizens. Seixas’s letter said, “Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Implicitly, the letter invited Washington to affirm his view.

How would the president respond? Would he respond at all? Then, as now, disputes over religion had the potential to dissolve into controversy.
Connections

1. Washington visited Newport in 1790 to fulfill a promise he made as an incentive to persuade Rhode Island to ratify the new US Constitution. Worried that the new nation would be dominated by larger states, Rhode Island was the last to ratify the document. What is consensus? Washington thought that forging consensus over the new Constitution was essential. Why? What is the power of consensus? In a democracy, under what circumstances is a simple majority not enough? Under what circumstances might the rights of a few be more important than the will of the majority?

2. What is the difference between power and leadership? According to the Constitution in 1790, Congress, not the president, had the power to determine who can be a citizen. (The Fourteenth Amendment later defined citizenship itself, removing that power from Congress). If Washington did not have the power to guarantee citizenship to the Jews in Newport, can you imagine other reasons for him to respond to the letter from Moses Seixas?

3. What does the phrase “religious freedom” mean to you? What specific freedoms does it include: Freedom of belief? Of observance? To preach and proselytize? To build a house of worship?

4. As the first president, many of Washington’s positions and policies set precedents for the future of the country. For instance, his decision to give an inaugural speech and his assembly of a cabinet became traditions that all other presidents have followed. How might the fact that the new country was looking to Washington to establish precedents for unsettled questions such as religious freedom complicate his decision about how to respond? What is the power of a precedent?

5. Washington’s decision about how to respond was also complicated by more fundamental questions about the nature of democracy. These questions will be explored later in this unit:
   - What characteristics must the members of a democracy share in order to foster a healthy democracy?
   - How much difference is too much difference in a democracy?
   - Do some differences matter more than others?

Take a few moments to record some preliminary thoughts about these questions in your journal.

6. The newly ratified Constitution brought a new sense of unity to the original thirteen states, but the commitment of these states to the new federal government was untested. What risks would Washington face in taking any position whatsoever on Seixas’s inquiry? Who might he upset by taking a position in favor of religious liberty? Who might he alienate by failing to do so?

7. At the time of Washington's visit to Newport, the Constitution had been ratified, but no provision for religious freedom had yet been added. The only reference to religion in the body of the Constitution (before the amendments) is in Article VI. That article states, in part, that no person can be excluded from holding any office in the federal government because of his or her religion.
Look up Article VI, and read it closely. To what extent does the article establish religious freedom? How is it different from the policies of the individual states in 1790?

8. In 1790, the addition of the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments) to the Constitution was being debated. The First Amendment begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” What is an establishment of religion? What might the consequences be for religious minorities when a country endorses an official national religion?

At the time the First Amendment was adopted, some states had established official churches (such as the Congregational Church in Massachusetts and the Episcopal Church in Virginia). Because it only limits the power of the federal government, the First Amendment also prohibited Congress from interfering with these state-established churches. Only after the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted in 1865 did the limitations of government described in the First Amendment apply to state governments as well.

9. Although it had not yet been adopted, Washington was a strong supporter of the Bill of Rights. What indication does Washington’s support for the Bill of Rights give for how he might respond to Seixas?

Creating Context with a Democracy Word Wall

Before reading, ask each student to think of a word or phrase that describes democracy. After recording their words or phrases in their journals, students can take about five minutes to write about the words they chose. Have the students write their words and phrases on blank notecards, and use the cards to make a word wall in the classroom. Students may share why they chose their words before pinning their notecards to the wall.

This word wall can provide the students both a shared language and a standard for comparison as they learn about how issues of religious difference were responded to in the early United States.

Discussion Strategies

The Think-Pair-Share and Fishbowl strategies both offer effective ways to facilitate a classroom conversation about these questions in a manner that encourages every student to participate and enables every voice to be heard.
“With the most cordial affection and esteem”

The Letter from Moses Seixas to George Washington follows:

Sir -

Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits—and to join with our fellow citizens in welcoming you to Newport.

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, and danger, when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword,—shielded Your head in the day of battle;—and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit, who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest, upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship:—deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or
language equal parts of the great governmental Machine:—This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual confidence and Public Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life:—And, when, like Joshua full of days and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island
Moses Seixas, Warden
August 17th 1790

Connections

1. Who was the audience of Seixas’s letter? What was his purpose? Was Washington the only person Seixas was writing for? What did Seixas and his congregation hope that Washington would do upon receiving this letter?

2. Describe Seixas’s objective in his letter. What is his strategy for each paragraph? How do you win someone over in writing?

3. How does Seixas use language to achieve his goal? Which of Sexias’s phrases and sentences were most significant and meaningful? Which might have had the greatest impact on Washington?

4. According to this letter, where does Seixas believe that the government’s authority comes from? Do you agree with him?

5. What other groups living in the United States at the time had the same concerns as the Jews of Newport? What groups today might have similar concerns?
**Exploring the Letter Online**

This letter can be challenging for many people to fully understand, in part because Seixas makes numerous biblical references with which some readers may not be familiar. The National Museum of Jewish American History has created an interactive, annotated version of this letter in order to explain the meaning and implications of many of the phrases and sentences Seixas wrote. Consider sharing this online version of the letter with your students, asking them to copy and summarize in their journals the meanings of the phrases and sentences the site highlights.

**Reading Strategies to Enhance Comprehension**

If you are reading this letter together as a class, consider a Read Aloud strategy that will enable the group to work together effectively to understand the language and meaning of the text. If the students will read this letter independently or in small groups, consider using the Chunking strategy to improve comprehension by breaking down the text into manageable pieces.

**Analyzing the Document**

Provide students with a template for analyzing primary source documents. One template, which guides students to think about the author, audience, purpose, and language of the primary source, is provided at the end of this resource.
Difference and Democracy

In his address, Moses Seixas invites the first president to affirm that the government he leads gives “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” In deciding how to respond, Washington must consider some fundamental questions about democratic societies:

- What must the members of a society share in order to foster a healthy democracy?
- How much difference is too much difference in a democracy?
- Do some differences matter more than others?
- Can a government that discriminates based on any difference truly be called a democracy?

What follows are descriptions of four schools of thought that Washington likely would have found familiar or provocative as he considered the letter he received from the Jewish congregation of Newport.

1. The Puritan Model

Even though they left England to escape religious intolerance, the Puritans created a society in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600s on the premise that religious conformity was essential for their survival. Dissent was not tolerated, and they believed conformity of religious belief, as enforced by government and the clergy, was essential for the very survival of their society.

In the PBS film God in America, historian of religion, Stephen Prothero summarizes the view of the Puritans in Massachusetts:

Who was living in the United States in 1790? What differences existed?

In order to understand the importance of Washington’s response to Moses Seixas (which you will explore in Reading 4), it is helpful to think about the people and groups that inhabited the United States at the time. Take a few minutes to brainstorm as many details as you can to answer the questions above. Record your thoughts in your journal.
The fate of the society hung on the religiosity of the society.... And if they turned away from God, God would turn away from them.... “If we are good, then God will bless us and we will prosper. And if we don’t, if we screw up, if we start to fight with one another, if we start to seek our own ends, God will turn on us and this will be a total miserable failure.”

What they believed to be the one, true faith was central to the identity of the society the Puritans created. Governor John Winthrop and other officials of the colony were the sole interpreters of that faith. If religious differences were tolerated, or if the authority of the colony’s officials was challenged, the Puritans believed their society would unravel. Prothero continues:

How are you going to set up a society where everybody is reading [and interpreting] the key document [the Bible]? Because this was a biblical commonwealth...that’s being run by religious law, religious principles. If everybody can read the Bible for themselves, how are you going to hold a society together? One person’s going to say this is lawful; one person’s going to say this is not.1

Anne Hutchinson was one member of the colony who challenged John Winthrop’s civil authority to require conformity of religious belief by claiming that God spoke directly to her, rather than through the leaders and clergy of Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1637, she was banished from the colony.

To learn more, watch Episode 1 (“A New Adam”), Chapter 3 (“Anne Hutchinson’s Rebellion”) of God in America on the PBS website.

2. Reason, Free Inquiry, and Natural Rights

Influenced by the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century intellectual, scientific, and political movement, some American revolutionaries such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed that people and society should be guided by human reason, rationality, and scientific inquiry.

Unlike the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony in the previous century, Madison and Jefferson believed that individuals ought to be free to use their own capacity to reason to determine their beliefs. A particular religious faith, or any faith at all, could not be mandated by the government. Jefferson writes: “Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against errors.... Give a loose to them and they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal.”2 Madison adds: “Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us.”3

Thus according to the many adherents of the Enlightenment, the values of reason, free inquiry, and natural rights guided the progress of society, strengthened democracy, and protected freedom of religious belief.
To learn more, read the Facing History blog post “Truth Is Great”: Jefferson and the Language of the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom

3. The Cult of Reason

In the 1790s, revolutionaries in France took Enlightenment values even further than did Madison and Jefferson. The French Revolution was, in large part, a revolt against the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, which many revolutionaries saw as a partner with the French monarchy to maintain traditional social hierarchies. On July 12, 1790, a month before Washington’s visit to Newport, the National Assembly of France passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. This law ended the autonomy of the Roman Catholic Church in France, placing it fully under control of the new regime. It completed the confiscation of the Church’s land in France (which began under previously passed laws), eliminated the primary source of funding for the Church (the practice of tithing), and ended the power of the Pope to choose bishops in France. Now, bishops would be elected by the French people; even non-Catholics were allowed to participate in the elections. The clergy was also now required to take an oath of loyalty to the nation:

Before the ceremony of consecration begins, the bishop elect shall take a solemn oath, in the presence of the municipal officers, of the people, and of the clergy, to guard with care the faithful of his diocese who are confided to him, to be loyal to the nation, the law, and the king, and to support with all his power the constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the king.4

After the execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793, leaders of the French Republic attempted to replace Catholicism altogether in French life. Behind declarations that there is “no religion but liberty” and “one god only, the people,” they established the atheistic Cult of Reason. Several cathedrals and churches in various parts of France were purged of Catholic symbols and renamed “Temples of Reason.”5 While freedom of worship was still officially recognized by the republic, religious practice was largely driven underground because of fear of persecution.6 In the violent and turbulent years that followed, the Cult of Reason was replaced by the more moderate, deistic Cult of the Supreme Being, and then the Catholic Church officially regained authority in France with the ascent of Napoleon in 1801.7

4. Tocqueville’s America: Faith in Democracy

While revolutionary fervor built in France (eventually exploding into violence), yet another belief was emerging in the young United States: religious practice, unimpeded by government, strengthens democracy. While this perspective was emerging in the 1780s, especially during Virginia’s debate over religious freedom, it was described most eloquently several decades later by French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville in his book Democracy in America.

Having witnessed the animosity towards religion during the French Revolution, Tocqueville was struck during his travels in America by the intense religiosity of the public there. He attributed it to the fact that the American government mandated no official religion. He wrote: “The church cannot share the temporal power of the state without being the object
of a portion of that animosity which the latter excites.8 By not requiring citizens to adhere to a particular faith, all faiths flourished. Despite this diversity of faith (within Christianity, for the most part), Tocqueville believed that the religiosity of Americans played an essential role in stabilizing its democracy. In Democracy in America, he writes: “[W]hile the law permits the Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust.”9 Put another way, religion ensured social stability and public morality; it was useful as well as spiritual.

In another part of his book, Tocqueville writes that religion strengthens American democracy by balancing the Enlightenment focus on the individual with concern for the greater good of society. He writes:

The greatest advantage of religion is to inspire diametrically contrary principles. There is no religion that does not place the object of man's desires above and beyond the treasures of earth and that does not naturally raise his soul to regions far above those of the senses. Nor is there any which does not impose on man some duties towards his kind and thus draw him at times from the contemplation of himself. This is found [even] in the most false and dangerous religions.10

For Tocqueville, however, some differences were too different. While he was not troubled by the variety of Christian sects present in the country (he writes that “Christian morality is everywhere the same”11), he did not believe the effects of non-Christian faiths are as benevolent to a democratic society. It is this very question that Moses Seixas invites Washington to address.

Contemporary Dutch scholar Ian Buruma agrees with Tocqueville’s belief in the value of religion in the life of a democracy, but he extends that belief to all faiths. Buruma asserts that democracy is sustainable no matter what differences, religious or otherwise, exist within society, so long as all of its members share respect for the basic tenets of democracy itself. He writes:

The way forward, then, is not to insist on social, let alone theological, conformity, but on observance of the law and of the basic rules of democratic society. As long as people play by the rules of free speech, free expression, independent judiciaries, and free elections, they are democratic citizens.12

To learn more, read the Facing History blog posts:

- Tocqueville on Democracy and Religion
- Ian Baruma: How Much (Religious) Freedom Is Too Much Freedom?
Connections

1. How does each school of thought view differences, especially religious differences?
2. Are there any groups that lived in the United States in 1790 that each school of thought would exclude? What does each group you listed in response to the Creating Context questions stand to gain or lose from each way of thinking described in this reading?
3. How well does each school of thought support the essential characteristics of democracy that you discussed before Reading 1?

Brainstorming About the United States, 1790

To begin to consider what was at stake in Washington’s response to Moses Seixas, it will be helpful to think about the people and groups that inhabited the United States in 1790. This is the purpose of the questions in Creating Context. Students’ knowledge may vary significantly, depending on the history they learned prior to this lesson. Regardless, this brainstorming exercise will be a useful beginning to this lesson, even if you need to contribute groups to the list the class compiles.

Begin this brainstorming exercise using the Think-Pair-Share strategy. As the students work, start an Identity Chart for the United States in 1790 on the board. As pairs of students share out their thinking with the whole group, add the names of the groups they suggest, when accurate, to the chart. Make sure that the Identity Chart represents the different faiths, races, ethnicities, countries of origin, and classes that were present.

Digging Deeper

This reading briefly describes four schools of thought about difference and democracy. In order to satisfy student curiosity or broader educational objectives for your class, you may wish to explore with your students some of these ideas more deeply. Therefore, each section of this reading is followed by links to additional readings or videos that provide additional context and detail.

Small-Group Collaboration

As the students explore the ideas in this reading, have them record their thinking about the questions above in their journals. It might be especially useful to divide the class into four or more groups and to assign each group one school of thought from the reading to analyze. That way, students have the opportunity to discuss the complex ideas with a partner or small group before recording their thinking. If the students work in groups, you might set up a Jigsaw activity or a whole-group discussion (see suggestion below) to ensure that students learn about all four schools of thought.
Discussion Strategies

Your students can explore these readings using a variety of formats, but these readings are especially well-suited for the Town Hall Circle discussion strategy. To prepare for this activity, divide the class into four groups, and assign each group only one of the four sections of the reading.

Assessment Ideas

To assess your students’ understanding of the concepts in this lesson, you might ask them to choose a group from the identity chart created in the opener and write a short composition (one to two pages) about that group in response to these two questions:

- What is at stake for each group living in the United States in 1790 in the ideas exchanged between Moses Seixas and George Washington?
- What does each group stand to gain or lose in how religious freedom and other issues of difference are resolved?

Alternatively, you might choose to have each student complete an Exit Card as an assessment. On their cards, students can write about which of the schools of thought described in this lesson they found most convincing and why.

2. Quoted by Gary Kowalski, Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America’s Founding Fathers (New York: Blue Bridge, 2008), 137.
9. Ibid. 1:316.
10. Ibid. 2:23.
11. Ibid. 1:314.
Freedom and Tolerance

Writing shortly after receiving the letter from Seixas, Washington reassured the Jewish community of Newport that his government would “give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” And he went further, explaining the difference between true freedom and tolerance. Washington wrote, “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.”

Here, as many read it, the president proposes that in the new nation, members of each religion will be able to practice their individual faiths by right and not through the permission, or indulgence, of the majority. “All,” Washington stipulates, “possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” By anchoring the freedom to exercise one’s religious beliefs in natural rights, Washington defines religious freedom as a natural right that precedes any constitution or laws, in the same way that the Declaration of Independence had defined “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” in 1776. Put another way, the right to freedom of religion is inborn in each human being, not granted by the government. Religious freedom was defined that way in no other place in the world.

Washington’s letter was not an isolated document. He had written other letters to America’s Quakers, Catholics, and Baptists, but this one was picked up in newspapers across the country. Many historians feel the exchange has special weight because of the its timing—in the midst of debate over the adoption of the Bill of Rights and its First Amendment, which declares, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Since its adoption in 1791, the First Amendment has become the legal standard through which many view debates over religion.

Washington offered something equally important. As a leader, and the first president of the nation, he offered a moral vision that balances respect
for religious difference with the responsibilities of citizenship. And yet how do we reconcile this story with the understanding that Newport’s wealth was built to some degree on profits from the slave trade? Nor did he suggest that women were politically equal to men. It was understood in his time that when Washington reassured Seixas that the federal government “gives to bigotry no sanction,” his words were not meant to apply to everyone.

Below is the letter George Washington wrote in response to Moses Seixas:

The Letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island:

Gentlemen -

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. 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. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington
August 21, 1790
Connections

1. Briefly review the four schools of thought about democracy and difference from Reading 3. Which of these schools of thought influenced Washington in his letter to Seixas? Did one have a greater impact on Washington’s thinking than the others?

2. Washington writes: “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.” What distinction is he making between toleration and natural rights? Why is this an important difference?

3. When Washington wrote that the United States government “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” what forms of bigotry and persecution do you think he was referring to? Should minority groups in the United States at the time other than Jews have felt encouraged by Washington’s words?

4. Many Founding Fathers of the United States owned slaves, including Washington and Thomas Jefferson (who wrote the Declaration of Independence). How should we interpret Washington’s words in light of the fact that in some important ways he did not live up to them in his life? What questions would you like to ask Washington to help you better understand the meaning of his words in his letter to the Jews of Newport?

5. Analyze the style and tone of Washington’s letter. How does it compare to the style and tone of the letter he received from Seixas?

6. Observe the words and phrases that Washington repeats from Seixas’s letter. Why do you think Washington chose to repeat those particular phrases?

7. According to Washington, where does government’s authority come from? Does Seixas agree with him? Do you?
Pre-reading: Sentence Stems
Create an anticipation guide using the sentence stems below. By completing each sentence, students will begin to consider some of the key ideas in the Reading 4:

- Religious freedom means that…
- When we "tolerate" someone who is different, we…
- A good citizen is someone who…
- In a democracy, people can…

Exploring the Letter Online
This letter can be challenging for many people to fully understand, in part because Washington echoes some of Seixas's wording and makes biblical references with which some readers may not be familiar. The National Museum of Jewish American History has created an interactive, annotated version of this letter in order to explain the meaning and implications of many of the phrases and sentences Washington wrote. Consider sharing this online version of the letter with your students, asking them to copy and summarize in their journals the meanings of the phrases and sentences the site highlights.

Reading Strategies to Enhance Comprehension
If you are reading this letter together as a class, consider a Read Aloud strategy that will enable the group to work together effectively to understand the language and meaning of the text. If the students will read this letter independently or in small groups, consider using the Chunking strategy to improve comprehension by breaking down the text into manageable pieces.

Analyzing the Document
Provide students with a template for analyzing primary-source documents. One template, which guides students to think about the author, audience, purpose, and language of the primary source, is provided at the end of this resource.

Discussion Strategies
The Think-Pair-Share or Fishbowl strategies both offer effective ways to facilitate a classroom conversation about these questions in a manner that encourages every student to participate and enables every voice to be heard.

Assessment Idea
Any of the discussion questions above can be used as prompts for a formal writing assignment. You might assign students to respond to one or more of the questions in order to demonstrate their understanding of the ideas in this lesson.
Exploring Religious Freedom in US History

The next reading, Reading 5, explores some contemporary echoes of Washington’s letter. Before doing so, you might decide to extend this unit by exploring one or more additional moments in American history when religious freedom and democracy seemed to be in tension with each other. Below are some topics you might explore, but this list is by no means exhaustive:

- The role of religion in the life of Nat Turner and the restrictions placed on religious practice by slaves in the South after Turner’s 1831 rebellion.
- The history of violence against Mormons in the early years of the history of their faith.
- John F. Kennedy’s 1960 speech as a presidential candidate about separating his Catholic faith from his responsibilities as president.
- The Faith in America timeline on PBS’s God in America website. What other pivotal moments in the relationship between religion and American democracy do you notice?
Contemporary Echoes

Echoes of Washington’s exchange with Seixas can be heard around the world today as both new and established democracies respond to the differences within their societies.

In January 2012, a year after the overthrow of its autocratic government, majority-Muslim Egypt elected a new Parliament whose majority is formed by Muslim political parties. A group of Coptic Christian youth responded to the election results by releasing a letter on their Facebook page asking questions about the role of Christians in the new government:

Gentlemen of the majority in the parliament, we address you with all respect. Will you rule us according to law or will you deal with us as a Christian minority. And how will you deal with our women? How will you see their faces and their uncovered hair?

And how you will see our right to build houses of worship? How you will deal with our rights to legal status in marriage and inheritance? What are your views of the religious reference of the Constitution…and minority rights?\(^3\)

Even established democracies must continue to respond to the differences in their ever-changing populations. The United States has grown significantly more diverse, especially since 1965 when immigration laws were changed to allow significantly more emigrants from Asia, Africa, and South America to enter the country.

Hindus are one group that has grown significantly in the United States since 1965. More than one million Hindus live in the United States, comprising about 0.4% of the adult population. Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11,
2001, one Hindu citizen wrote a letter to President George W. Bush seeking affirmation of the inclusion of Hindus in modern American society:

Dear Mr. President,

Subject: Why do you exclude Hindus from your prayers?

On Sunday, 16 September, 2001 during the prayer for the victims of the terrorist attacks, you included Christians, Jews, and Muslims. During your inauguration speech you urged Americans to “go to their churches, synagogues, and mosques to pray.” We wondered back in January, and we wonder now, Why do you exclude Hindus from your prayers? Why didn’t you ask a Hindu priest to join you at the podium, along with the Muslim cleric, the Priest, Preacher, and the Rabbi?

As our national leader, you have repeatedly expressed respect for America’s pluralistic and multi-cultural traditions. But, on the other hand, you have repeatedly excluded Hindu-Americans from your prayers.

Several thousand Indian-Americans worked in the World Trade Center and several hundred are now missing or dead. There are 800 Hindu Temples in North America. Every major city in the USA has at least one Hindu Temple. Every Hindu temple in North America had organized prayers during this weekend for its members to mourn the loss of all those who perished or suffered in the World Trade Center attacks last week.

Hindu-Americans are very much a part of our nation. Hindus are contributing members to the American society. Hindu-Americans pay lots and lots of taxes. Our children fill the colleges and universities. Hindus are very visible in this country: in schools, colleges and universities; hospitals, banks, law firms; accounting firms, high-tech firms; small businesses, hotels, motels, gas stations; convenience stores, taxi drivers,…every where. Hindus form the bedrock of the healthcare and info-tech industries in U.S.A. But we are not included in your prayers. Our places of worship are excluded from your references to the religious traditions practiced in this country. Please, Mr. President, next time, there must also be a Hindu Priest…when Americans are asked to pray for peace….

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, Hindu-Indians and our places of worship have become the target of xenophobic rage in some parts of North America. This is because many Americans do not know the difference between Hinduism and Islam; they lump them together as foreign religions. Your help in bringing the recognition to Hindus as a peace loving people who
have become an integral part of our society, would go a long way in educating Americans about Hinduism. Please help Americans understand these issues by bringing Hindu-Americans into the fold of the President’s well wishes and prayers.

Hinduism is a religion that is practiced by almost two million people in this country and another 20 million are adherents of Hindu principles and traditions such as Yoga and meditation. Therefore, we urge you again in closing: please, do not continue ignoring us. Lawmakers and officials in Washington do include Hindus when they pray. We urge you to henceforth include Hindus when you list the religiously pluralistic nature of our country and add Hindu Temples to your list of places of worship in our great nation.

God Bless America!
Respectfully,
S. Natarajan

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Connections

1. How are the concerns expressed in the letter from Egyptian Christians to the newly elected Parliament similar to the concerns Moses Seixas voiced to Washington? How are they different?

2. The relationship between religious minorities and the Muslim majorities in Arab countries is constantly being negotiated as new governments, aspiring towards democracy, are erected to replace old dictatorships in the Arab world. New York Times reporter Anthony Shadid poses the essential question facing these new governments: “How do a people who share a land, customs, history and a language find a common end?”

Read Shadid’s article about the rich, contentious, and sometimes violent history of Christians in the Arab world in the last two centuries, and then choose an Arab country—such as Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, or Libya—and research how that country’s government responds to religious minorities and other types of differences among its population. How might the story of Washington’s letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport provide guidance to the leaders of these countries?

3. How are the concerns that A. Natarajan voices in his letter to President Bush similar to those voiced by Moses Seixas in 1790? How are they different? Why is it significant that the president did not mention Hindus in his public prayers?

4. Imagine that you are president and received Natarajan’s letter about American Hindus. How would you have responded? What guidance might Washington’s letter have provided when crafting a public response?

5. Examine the data collected by the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life about religious practice in the United States. Which faiths should the president and other national leaders include in their public prayers and discussions of religion?

6. What other differences exist in the United States today? Who else might want to write the president for assurance of their place in American democracy? What concerns might others voice about the way that differences are treated in America?

7. What other differences exist in the United States that might make specific groups feel uncertain of their place in society?

8. How are democracies in other parts of the world responding to issues of difference? You might investigate the following issues:

   ■ The Muslim head scarf affair in France
   ■ The significant diversity of religion, language, and culture in India
   ■ The debate over religious freedom in Turkey
   ■ The role of religion in the debate over a variety of political issues in the United States
Pre-reading: Reflection and Discussion

Give students a few minutes to reflect on the quotation from Hastie and write in their journals. You might then briefly discuss Hastie’s concept of democracy using the Think-Pair-Share strategy. Also, remind the class to think about the characteristics they added to the democracy word wall. How do Hastie’s ideas relate to the class’s thinking about democracy?

Strategies for Discussion Connections Questions

The Think-Pair-Share or Fishbowl strategies both offer effective ways to facilitate a classroom conversation about these questions in a manner that encourages every student to participate and enables every voice to be heard.

Digging Deeper

One can find numerous echoes of Washington’s letter in events taking place around the world. Questions 2, 5, and 8 above provide a variety of avenues for further research. You might assign students, individually or in small groups, to research specific situations and prepare a short report for the class, highlighting the connections with Washington’s letter.

Assessment Suggestion

Any of the discussion questions above can be used as prompts for a formal writing assignment. You might assign students to respond to one or more of the questions in order to demonstrate their understanding of the ideas in this lesson.


The Original Letters

Moses Seixas’ letter to George Washington

Courtesy of the Morris Morgenstern Foundation
To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport,
Rhode Island,

Gentlemen,

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your address, reflect with expressions of affection and esteem, rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of citizens. The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past, is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and a happy people.

The citizens of the United States of America, have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All people alike, alike; liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. 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. For happily the

Courtesy of the Morris Morgenstern Foundation
Religious Freedom & Democracy

The original letters

George Washington's response
(page 1 of 2)

The government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their assiduous support. It would be inconsistent with the principles of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the Father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations here, and in his own due time and way, everlasting happiness.
Document Analysis Worksheet

Type of document (check one):

☐ Newspaper  ☐ Map  ☐ Advertisement
☐ Letter  ☐ Telegram  ☐ Congressional record
☐ Patent  ☐ Press release  ☐ Census report
☐ Memorandum  ☐ Report  ☐ Other

Date(s) of document:

__________________________________________________________________________

Author (or creator) of document:

__________________________________________________________________________

Position (title) of author:

__________________________________________________________________________

For what audience was the document written? How do you know?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Why was the document written? How do you know?

__________________________________________________________________________
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Quote three important phrases or sentences in the document, and then describe their meaning in your own words:

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<tr>
<th>PHRASE OR SENTENCE</th>
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List one or more questions you have about the document:

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Adapted from "Written Document Analysis Worksheet" created by the National Archives. ([http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html))