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California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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Give Bigotry No Sanction: A Lesson in Religious Freedom

By Mary Hendra, Facing History and Ourselves

Are certain religious beliefs or practices requisite for civic participation in the United States of America? How much difference is too much difference in a democracy? What must the members of a society share in order to foster a broad-based and vibrant democracy?

These fundamental questions are as relevant today as they were to our founding fathers. For they, like us, struggled to forge a unified nation where ethnic and religious differences could be mobilized to enrich its culture rather than break it apart. And they too were called to defuse minorities' fears that their religious beliefs would exclude them from civil life and the country's resources.

Facing History and Ourselves, in collaboration with the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom, has developed an online resource for exploring an early lesson in religious pluralism: the 1790 letter exchange between President George Washington and Moses Seixas, warden of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport Rhode Island.

In August of that year, President Washington sailed to Newport, Rhode Island, with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and other dignitaries. Three months earlier, hesitantly, Rhode Island had finally ratified the United States Constitution, and Washington was ready to reward the last state to do so with a full presidential visit. In Rhode Island and elsewhere, Jews, Catholics, Quakers and others anxiously awaited the president. They had all experienced discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs and feared that the new government would make it the law of the land. Religious groups in Rhode Island, who enjoyed large measures of religious freedom before independence, were especially worried about the integration of their small state into the Union. And the stakes were even higher for the small Jewish community of Newport, whose members had escaped persecutions both in Europe and in the Portuguese colony of Brazil.

And so, amidst all of these fears and anxieties, Washington was greeted by Moses Seixas, among other Newport leaders, with a message on behalf of Newport's small Jewish population:

"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."

Writing back just days later, the nation's first president reassured the Jewish community of Newport with echoes of Seixas' text, promising that his government "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," and went further, explaining the difference between mere forbearance and true freedom:

"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."

Washington envisioned that in the new nation, members of all religions would be able to practice their individual faiths by right – not through the permission or indulgence of the majority. "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship."

Washington's response, however, was not the final word on this subject. For example, even

after the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution, Jews were not guaranteed full civil rights across the country and, even today, antisemitism persists. Even so, Washington's vision still serves as an important touchstone for us today. What do his words mean in our time? For us, and especially for teachers, this is an opportunity to explore the place of religion in society and to explore the issues surrounding inclusion and exclusion, integration and civic participation.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, an anonymous Hindu citizen of the United States wrote to President George W. Bush with concerns that echoed those of Moses Seixas, asking that Hindus be recognized in the President's public prayers as a signal that they belong.

"Dear Mr. President," he wrote, "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? ...Please help Americans understand these issues by bringing Hindu-Americans into the fold of the President's well wishes and prayers."

By exploring religious pluralism at our founding and the ways religious membership has affected perceptions of and inclusion in civic participation, teachers can help students develop their civic literacy.

There is a similar, more personal story that can be compelling when thinking about the Washington-Seixas exchange. Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, describes a pivotal moment in his understanding of civic participation in his memoir, *Acts of Faith*.

"In high school, the group I ate lunch with included a Cuban Jew, a Nigerian Evangelical, and an Indian Hindu. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religions with one another. Often somebody would announce at the table that he couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than 'my mom said,' and nobody ever asked for one.

"This silent pact relieved all of us. We were not equipped with a language that allowed us to explain our faith to others or to ask about anyone else's. Back then, I thought little about the dangers lurking within this absence.

"A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend reminded me of a dark time during our adolescence. There were a group of kids in our high school, for several weeks, took up scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and making obscene statements about Jews in the hallways. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend."

Patel was silenced by a lack of language, a lack of understanding. In this essay, he shares this story and what he learned from it—that living in a pluralistic society, engaging in civic participation, requires a "deliberate engagement with difference," "an intentional commitment that is imprinted by action." The power of studying the correspondence between Washington and Seixas is that it can give students the tools, language, and opportunity for their own exploration of religion and civic participation today, and bolster their own civic engagement.

The exchange between George Washington and Moses Seixas (which will be on display at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles October 11th through February 17th within the Library of Congress exhibit of our founding documents, "Creating the United States") provides an entry point to exploring how we deal with difference in current society, connecting to both political events and students' lives.

The CA 3Rs Project is sponsoring two upcoming workshops on the Washington Letter and its relevancy today which will be held on November 3, 2012 at the San Joaquin COE in Stockton, and on December 1, 2012 at the Best Western Heritage Inn in Rancho Cucamonga. In addition to the Skirball Cultural Center exhibit, "Creating the United States," Facing History and Ourselves and Skirball will present an educator workshop on "Give Bigotry No Sanction: Exploring Religious Freedom and Democracy" on Saturday, January 12, 2013. For more information and registration: www.facinghistory.org/workshops. Facing History's online resource, which includes images and transcriptions of both letters, a historical timeline, lesson activities, and blog posts by esteemed historians, can be accessed here: nobigotry.facinghistory.org.

References:

¹ Seixas' letter is available in full at: nobigotry.facinghistory.org

² President Washington's letter is available in full at: nobigotry.facinghistory.org

³ This comes from a lesson plan available at: nobigotry.facinghistory.org

⁴ "Talking about Religion" from Stories of Identity is available for free download at www.facinghistory.org

⁵ *ibid*

Facing History and Ourselves, One Nation: Many Faiths TAH Project, San Joaquin COE, CSU San Bernardino-ELC,
and the California 3Rs Project
invite you to participate in



Give Bigotry No Sanction – The Meaning of Religious Liberty in America

George Washington’s 1790 Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI

Join Facing History and Ourselves and the One Nation: Many Faiths TAH project for a look at the letter of George Washington in 1790 to the Hebrew Congregation at the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. This letter is a landmark in the history of religious freedom in America and part of a founding moment in U.S. history when the country was negotiating how a democracy accommodates the “deepest differences” among its people. Today this letter can serve as a guide in today’s changing global landscape, where Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, as well as people who belong to no religion, find themselves living alongside neighbors whose beliefs and practices are often quite different than their own. With this new diversity, there is a growing need worldwide to discuss religious freedom—and its limits—in secular, democratic societies. These are not easy conversations, and the tone of recent debates about religious difference suggests that we need to get better at talking about these issues, or else risk further polarization. Lesson materials and resources are provided for teachers to use Washington’s letters in their classrooms or other discussion forums.

Join us for one of the following 3 programs. There is no fee but registration is required

Select one of the following events and contact people. Email that contact person the date of your workshop, your name, school name, school street address, city, zip code, and phone number.

November 3, 2012

8:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.

San Joaquin COE – Nelson Education Center
2901 Arch Airport Rd, Stockton CA 95206

To register, contact Veray Wickham vwickham@sjcoe.net 209-468-9021

DEADLINE: October 26, 2012

December 1, 2012

8:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Best Western Heritage Inn

8179 Spruce Avenue Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730

To register, contact Margaret Hill mhill@csusb.edu 909-946-9035

DEADLINE: November 26, 2012

January 12, 2013

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles

To register: <http://www2.facinghistory.org/workshops>

DEADLINE: January 7, 2013

Common Ground Resources:

Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools by Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, Esq. First Amendment Center, 2007. This book has guidelines on how to handle a wide range of issues related to religious liberty and public schools. Download free at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/publications>.

The *Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum* <http://www.religiousfreedomeducation.org/> is a new program at the First Amendment Center focusing on religious liberty in public life.

CA 3Rs Project Website <http://ca3rsproject.org/>. This site has resources for teachers and administrators, documents published by the CA 3Rs Project, calendars of religious holidays, etc.

For California Three Rs Project program informaton, contact

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For First Amendment Religious Liberty Information, contact:

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, Senior Scholar, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center,
555 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001.
Phone (202)-292-6288 chaynes@freedom

For information on teaching about world religions, contact:

Dr. Bruce Grelle, Director, Religion and Public Education Resource Center, Department of Religious Studies, California State University, Chico, 239 Trinity Hall, Chico, CA 95929-0740
Phone (530) 898-4739 bgrelle@csuchico.edu