



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York* • *Curriculum Development Project*

## **“Liberty of Conscience” in George Washington’s Time and Today**

*Dr. Amber Bechard, JFK Middle School, Plainfield, IL*

### *Abstract*

This assignment will introduce to students to the fundamental American principle of “liberty of conscience,” through a close reading and discussion of George Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. The assignment was developed for 8th grade honors students in English Language Arts at a public middle school, and would be appropriate for a range of students from 8th through 10th grade.

The assignment will be one of several activities in a unit on freedom of speech and religion, and the affirmation of the individual. Prior to this lesson, students will have read and discussed a Thomas Jefferson quote with specific guidance.

Students will reflect on an Essential Question: *How does “liberty of conscience” apply to today’s world?*

### *Rationale and State Standards*

The central principle of “liberty of conscience” is an important tenet of a safe, supportive classroom community, where individual thought and religious liberty must be prized. Using George Washington, a respected historical figure, as an entry point to the discussion of religious freedom sets a necessarily academic tone for the study of religion in the public school classroom.

As indicated in Common Core State Standards, exposing students to the critical analysis of informational texts – particularly primary source documents of historical significance – is essential. As well, students need to be able to speak about their analysis, citing specific textual evidence to support their ideas. See below for more details on Common Core standards.

## *Learning activities:*

### **Day One**

- 1)** A close read of the excerpt of the letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation – included below. (20 min)

As students enter the room, distribute the letter. Students then individually read the letter one time for overall understanding. On the second read students will note the three lines or phrases of text that indicate a central theme, highlight and annotate to explain their thinking. On the third read, students will make additional notes on the extension of the central idea beyond the text.

- 2)** Read aloud and share impactful text phrases. (10 min)

Read the text aloud to the entire class. Ask students to find the ONE word or phrase that is most impactful to them. Rotate through the class having each student say their line aloud.

- 3)** Journal personal reactions. (15 min)

Journal Title-“Letter from George Washington.” Guiding questions: What is the central idea of the text? Why do you suppose he wrote this letter? How are his ideas relevant today? Is there freedom of religion today?

- 4)** Socratic Seminar (30 min)

How can “liberty of conscience” be applied in our classroom and lives?

- 5)** Religious freedom in current events (homework)

Find a current events article or video clip from a reputable source. Print and read the article or bring in the video on a flash drive and come prepared to participate in small group discussions with peers.

### **Day Two**

- 6)** Small group discussions (30 min)

Assign small groups to discuss the articles and recurring issues.

- 7)** Read aloud of [\*Old Turtle and the Broken Truth\*](#), by Douglas Wood and Jon Muth. (10 min)

- 8)** Large group debriefing (10 min)

**This assignment satisfies the following Common Core State Standards:**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.5

Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9

Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A

Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.B

Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

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on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***

**Excerpt of the Letter from George Washington  
to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island**

Gentlemen-

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.

May the children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of other inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

George Washington  
August 21, 1790