



Religious Freedom Then

Lesson Objectives:

1. To understand how religious conflicts before and after the birth of the American nation were as deep and wide as those we are encountering in America today.
2. To explore how colonial America and the Founding Fathers responded to such controversies: some resorting to exclusion and oppression and others heading down the path of pluralism, eventually resulting in the First Amendment.

Introduction:

As we discussed this morning, arguments over the separation of church and state continue to this very day despite the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution and similar amendments to state constitutions. Today arguments on the political right and left often revolve around differing claims seeking to interpret the framers' actual intent.

This afternoon we want to examine some of the forces that led the earliest Americans to argue about the relationship between the state and various religious beliefs and practices. What can we discover about what men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison had in mind as they designed the state and federal documents and institutions which govern us today?

The long quest for religious freedom spurred colonization, but life in the early American colonies was not without setbacks and ambivalence. This afternoon, by using primary documents (including speeches, letters and statutes), we are going to return to the actual words of some of the major players who struggled to create a nation based on universal values but one in which government and churches would be separate.

Procedure:

1. Ask the LEADDers: To what extent was the population of the U.S. religiously diverse in 1789? What religious groups are you aware of in the original colonies? Would you expect this diversity of faith traditions to be significant enough to cause controversy among early Americans? Do you know of any examples of conflict?

2. In our quest to explore these questions further, let's look at the action taken by newly inaugurated President George Washington in a series of letters he wrote between 1789 and 1790 to religious leaders and congregations of various faiths. The content of the letters is basically the same. He either assures the recipients that the national government will remain neutral in religious matters or he defends the government's neutrality.

- a. **Please open your Forrest Church text to page 107.** Let's take an inventory of which groups Washington felt the need to reassure. We will list them on the board as you read them out to us. [Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Jews.]
- b. What conclusions can be drawn from Washington's letters?

- c. Can anyone name some faith traditions that did **not** receive a letter? [If Muslims are mentioned, refer to the Treaty of Tripoli, page 123. If Hindus are mentioned, refer to Jefferson's comments on page 74.] **Expected response:** Anglicans and Congregationalists. Why would Washington choose **not** to write letters to these groups? (They were the dominant religions: Congregational in New England, Anglican in Virginia and other parts of the South.)

Background information (which may or may not be shared with LEADDers):

One force leading to the debate about the role of church and state in the new republic was **The Great Awakening**. This spiritual movement swept through the colonies in the 1730's and 40's. Careful reading of the gospels and freedom of conscience were stressed. It promoted the growth of Presbyterian, Baptists, and Methodist churches and persuaded many Americans that God works directly through each individual. As religious minorities, members of these churches passionately advocated freedom from the religious majority or established churches (the Congregationalists and the Anglicans).

- 3. We are now going to divide you into 6 groups.** Three groups will be reading accounts of the experiences of religious minorities: Anne Hutchinson (Denny); the Baptists (Preet); and the Quakers (Janice). The other three groups will be examining documents produced by individuals advocating religious liberty (so-called "voices of reason"): Samuel Adams (Ginny); Thomas Jefferson (Jerry); and John Leland (Ed).

You will be asked to read the documents and respond to the questions that are listed at the end of each reading. Get your group organized so that one person serves as the **facilitator**, making sure that everyone participates and keeps the discussion on track; a second serves as the **recorder**, taking good notes of key points; a third is the **timer**, keeping track of time and making sure that the summary you develop is concise and to the point; a fourth is the **reporter**, who will provide an oral summary to the whole group of your findings; and a fifth is the **inquirer**, who will think about parallels which can be drawn between what was going on in these 18th and 19th century religious conflicts and controversies going on today. Each group will have an adult present to help clarify points and try to answer any questions you may have.

- 4.** Following the group work, we will re-convene in a plenary session to record the responses of each group on a chart on the whiteboard. LEADDers will be encouraged to take notes. A discussion will follow on the following points:

- a. What conclusions can be drawn regarding the range of religious diversity both before and after the birth of the American nation?
- b. How did early Americans respond to this diversity?
- c. What parallels can be drawn between what was going on in the early American era in terms of religious controversy and contemporary conflicts over issues of church and state? [E.g., current examples of prejudice against particular religious groups, troubling stereotypes, religious issues in the presidential campaign, etc.]