

Examining the Bill of Rights with Emphasis on Religious Freedom

Goals

Students will interpret primary documents in order to engage in historical-issues analysis and decision making. This will allow them to identify issues and problems in the past and analyze the values and points of view of those groups and individuals directly involved in the actual situation.

The broader aims of this unit are to study the religion clauses to the First Amendment by tracing the roots of the struggle for religious freedom here in Virginia. Through the use of these primary sources, students will become more focused on the role of church-state issues in Virginia and their effect on the national debate on religious freedom. At the end of the unit, the students will be able to do the following tasks:

- Identify and interpret primary source documents
- Analyze primary and secondary source documents
- Distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information
- Identify a problem and prioritize solutions
- Interpret diagrams, graphs and charts

Objectives

Students will be able to analyze primary source documents by looking at the different ways the Commonwealth worked through disestablishment, ultimately arriving at the concept of “building a wall between church and state.” They will directly compare this to the national drive culminating in the first part of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. They will have to end by taking a critical look at the state of religiosity in America today. The lesson incorporates homework, individual and group work, as well as critical writing.

This unit will have to start with a critical look at established religion in Europe as well as Colonial Virginia. Since the final word on a government or a society is how they treat their minorities, religious dissenters must be studied. The formal legal documents must be analyzed for the paramount effect they not only had on Virginia but the nation itself. Finally, an analysis must be derived from the current charts and graphs measuring the state of religion in America.

Prerequisites

- Previous work with Document Based Questions (Advanced Placement U.S. History in the 11th grade)
- An understanding of the concept of an established religion
- A working knowledge of the freedom of religion clauses found in the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights

Materials

1. Patrick Henry's "A Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion", 1784 (handout)
2. "Summons to Nathaniel Saunders", August 22, 1772
3. "The Dunking of David Barrow and Edward Mintz in the Nansemond River", 1778
4. James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments", 1785
5. Article 16 of the Virginia Declaration of Rights
6. Thomas Jefferson's "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom", 1785
7. First Amendment to the United States Constitution, 1791
8. Council for America's First Freedom's "Landmark Declarations of Religious Freedom" (handout)
9. George Washington's "Letters on Religious Liberty Tested", 1789-1791 (handout)
10. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948
11. International Freedom of Religion Act, 1998
12. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008

Lesson Description

The focus of this lesson is to join together the various individuals and groups and their efforts to bring about changes needed to ensure religious freedom in Virginia. The persecution of the dissenters (especially Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians) by the established Anglican Church cannot be overlooked. The individual contributions by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison must be fully explored and analyzed. Students must discern the direct lineage between the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the National Bill of Rights, and the idea that the quest for religious freedom did not end in 1791 but continues through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and persists today through the analysis of the data in the latest Pew Report.

Lesson Procedure

The hope here is to take a standard **Virginia SOL, Govt 11a**, and expand it into a lesson for Advanced Placement Government. The lesson should require two 45-minute class periods.

- Background—A detailed study of the First Amendment and the Patrick Henry handout given out beforehand.
- Introduction—Teacher directed lecture on the established Roman Church in Europe and the Anglican Church in Virginia (20 minutes).
- Main Activity—Analysis of documents done in the computer lab. The class will be divided into three groups.
 - The Dissenters
 - The Legal Documents
 - The Legacy Today

This will last for the rest of the period and send home the Landmark and Washington handouts. They will present their findings for the entire period the next day.

Assessment and Evaluation

The students will be required to prepare a formal take-home essay on the following topic:

George Washington identifies basic principles of religious freedom in only one of his letters. State these principles and take into consideration the treatment of religious minorities as well as specific examples from history, law and current events. Evaluate and analyze whether or not America has lived up to the principles stated in Washington's letter.