

The Right to Religious Freedom Lesson Plan

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Overview:

This lesson is meant to accompany or follow a larger discussion of the Bill of Rights. It accompanies Chapter 8, "Keeping the Faith; the Right to Religious Freedom," in *Wherever There's a Fight* and highlights First Amendment issues around religious freedom. The text highlights case studies from 20th century California of minority populations struggling for their right to practice their faith—or the right not to practice any faith. These compelling stories make real and vivid the struggle to protect our First Amendment rights.

This lesson meets the state of California History-Social Science Content Standards for:

- 11th Grade U.S. History and Geography: 11.3 (principles of religious liberty through a study of the First Amendment)
- 12th Grade Principles of American Democracy and Economics: 12.2 and 12.5 (a close study of the Bill of Rights with an emphasis on judicial interpretation and public controversies)

Learning Objectives: Students will understand:

- Why minority religious communities are vulnerable to violations of their religious liberty
- How times of social stress or war create a set of conditions that threaten civil liberties
- How the judicial branch can function to protect minority populations against popular prejudice as expressed through local officials
- How judges sometimes have to weigh Constitutional protections against competing claims, e.g. for public safety
- How the appeals process can function to maximize plaintiffs' opportunities to protect their rights and set a wider precedent to protect others in similar circumstances

Duration: 2-4 Class Periods; (*Classwork given here could be given for homework, group work given here could be done individually etc.)

Resources: text, markers, poster paper, tape/tacks, and [Handout #1](#)

Activities:

Warm Up:

Write the First Amendment on the board:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Tell students that this lesson will focus on the first underlined part of the First Amendment: the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment. Ask students to explain in their notebooks each of these clauses in their own words.

For discussion:

- For the establishment clause: Why is it important that our government not "make a law respecting an establishment of religion"? What would our country look like if we did have a state sanctioned religion? What issues would arise? For which populations? Can students name/describe countries that do not have an establishment clause?
- For the free exercise clause: What rights does this guarantee for us? Give examples of what "free exercise" rights might look like or why exercising these rights could become controversial.
- For both the Establishment clause and the Free Exercise clause, what value(s) do you think the framers of the Constitution wanted to protect? Why, or in what settings do you think these values could come under attack?

Main Activity

Tell students that they will work in groups to read the stories of a diverse group of Californians who had to go to court to protect their First Amendment rights from school, police, military, prison, state and federal officials during the 20th Century.

- Jehovah's Witnesses (p.287-293)
- Navajo American Church (p.293-295)
- Black Muslims (p. 295-298)
- Logging Trucks through Sacred Land (p.298-301)
- From Playground to Graduation: Including All Students (p. 301-304)
- Institutionalized Religion (p. 304-305)
- Five Sacred Symbols (p.305-307)

(*You may want to combine some of the shorter sections into one group)

For each group:

Read your section of the text quietly to your self or aloud together. If you are reading silently record your responses to the following questions (see [Handout #1](#)) in your notebook. When you are all finished, share your responses with your group—filling out your own notes if your group members included important details that you left out. If you are reading aloud together, each group member should write down your group's responses

to the following questions (the group members' responses could vary depending on the question—they don't have to all be identical!):

- Who are the protagonists in this story (the main characters)? Give as much detail as is necessary for us to understand why they are important in this story.
- What happened (or was threatened to happen) to them?
- Give examples (if applicable) of how they suffered as a result of their rights being violated.
- Was there something about the context (the time period or the place where the events happened) that magnified or made stronger the effort to violate the protagonists' rights? Were there commonly held prejudices that impacted their experience?
- Choose language (a phrase or set of sentences) from a judge's decision (or an attorney's argument) that feels compelling to you and write it down—why did you choose this quote to highlight?
- What, in this story, was surprising to you? Why was it surprising?
- For the government officials who moved to violate someone's First Amendment rights—how do you think they would describe or defend their actions? Why did they do it (or plan/want to do it?) What values/customs/ideas do you think they were acting to protect?

Choose a quote from your section that your group feels is a compelling statement about the issues raised in your section—write it on a large piece of poster paper and post it on the wall.

Fishbowl

Each group chooses two representatives. Each set of representatives will be interviewed in turn by the teacher while the rest of the class sits in a circle around them. The interview will largely follow the questions. While students listen to each interview (not including their own group), they write down 3 things they hear that caught their attention and/or are essential to understanding this story OR replace one of those with a burning question they have about the case.

Each interview will conclude with a group member (not one of the two representatives) reading their groups' quote that is posted on the wall and explaining why their group felt it was important to share. After each interview, the teacher will solicit both comments and questions from listening students that they had written down in their notes during the interview.

Whole group debrief

- Did the people who fought for their rights consider themselves civil rights activists or regular people? What made them take a stand? Can you relate to them—why or why not?

- In what ways do people suffer when they take a stand to protect their First Amendment rights?
- For the school or government officials who acted to violate someone's First Amendment protections—what pressures do you think they felt? How would they describe or defend their own actions? Can you relate to their arguments? Why or why not?
- Of the stories we studied, which of the people involved would you most like to meet and why? What would you tell them? Why does their story matter to you?

Assessment Ideas

- Collect and review student notebooks
- Put together a quiz based on Fishbowl activity/text assignment
- Ask students to write an "exit card" using their notes to write a short paragraph highlighting what they will remember about the struggles for religious freedom