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Freedom for America

Throughout this nation's existence, the subject of religious freedom has had the power to divide people. When the United States of America was first founded, the founding fathers ensured religious freedom by passing the bill of rights. The bill of rights contains the First Amendment, which allows for one's religious freedom. However, the First Amendment was not ratified until 1791, and the topic of individual rights in the new nation was a key focus of the Americans in 1790. Religious freedom was so important that Moses Seixas, a Jewish man living in Newport, Rhode Island, took it upon himself to write George Washington to test where he stood. Seixas, like many other Americans, wondered what the President thought about religious freedom and the unalienable rights of the people that were mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. Now that the new country was founded, the people wanted to be assured that the government officials kept their word. George Washington answered Seixas's letter with one of his own, guaranteeing that their right to religious freedom would be secured. Despite the occasional obstacles, over the years, the United States of America has worked to maintain the same standard of religious freedom set forth by George Washington in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island.

Of all the states in America, Rhode Island is the most significant when it comes to religious freedom. Rhode Island was a colony founded by Rogers Williams on the basis of religious tolerance. After being banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony for his radical and

differing beliefs, Roger Williams wanted to create a place where religion and government were separate. Rhode Island quickly became a haven for many people of different beliefs. Newport, a city in Rhode Island, also has an important background in religious freedom. Newport is home to Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue still standing in the United States. Moses Seixas and many other Jewish people in Newport worshipped at Touro Synagogue. Religious Freedom was very important to the Jewish community that worshipped at Touro Synagogue. Many of the community hailed from families that had to hide their religion or constantly move because of it. The synagogue was a symbol to them. It symbolized that their time of hiding was over, because in America, they were free to be themselves. This is why it was imperative to them that their religious freedom would be secured in the new country. George Washington not only tells them that they will be ensured their religious freedom, but he also tells them that it's a natural right for them to worship whomever they please. He tells them that, "the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..."(George Washington Letter). This means that the government will not support the persecution of others based upon religion, unlike the other countries that they came from which experienced the Inquisition. Washington set forth a standard that day, a standard that the United States government has tried to keep up throughout the years.

Over the years there has been many court cases over the topic of religious freedom. Some of these cases even make it to the Supreme Court. One such case involved a man named Jesse Cantwell and his son in 1939. Cantwell was a Jehovah's Witness. He and his son were going around to people in a Catholic neighborhood with religious materials to convince the people in that community to convert to their religion. The court case then goes on to say, "After voluntarily hearing an anti-Roman Catholic message on the Cantwells' portable phonograph, two pedestrians

reacted angrily. The Cantwells were subsequently arrested for violating a local ordinance requiring a permit for solicitation and for inciting a breach of the peace” (Oyez). The case was brought to the Supreme Court because it was argued that the “breach of the peace” ordinance infringed upon Cantwell’s First Amendment rights of free exercise. The Free Exercise Clause “bans the government from undue interference with a person’s right to practice their faith”(Pendergast 5). The Supreme Court unanimously sided with the Cantwells, saying that the ordinance not only infringed upon their First Amendment rights, but with their Fourteenth Amendment rights as well.

In current events, religious freedom still comes up occasionally and has the power to divide communities. One such issue that has occurred recently happened in Cranston, Rhode Island. At the Cranston High School West, there was a controversy over a prayer banner. The class of 1963 donated the prayer banner and the federal court ordered it to be removed after a case involving Jessica Ahlquist, a junior at that high school. “The prayer encourages students to strive academically and begins with the words ‘Our Heavenly Father’ and ends with ‘Amen.’ Ahlquist argued the banner didn’t belong and signaled to her that the school didn’t respect her views” (Fox News)Due to the Establishment Clause, the banner had to be removed. The Establishment Clause “prohibits the establishment of an ‘official’ state church and bans the government from taking any actions that may favor one religion over another” (Pendergast 5). This Clause supports Ahlquist because she is an Atheist and since the banner contained religious words, she believes that it’s supporting another religion and disrespecting her own.

Throughout the ages of American history, the government of the United States of America has worked to uphold the principle of religious freedom that George Washington set forth. The issue of religion has always been a controversy in America, and in some ways, it’s

responsible for America. Religion was the reason Rhode Island was formed, it's been the cause of various Supreme Court cases, and it still causes debates today. However, one thing is certain, the United States of America vigilantly tries to make America a safe haven to those being persecuted for their beliefs. If George Washington were here now, he'd be proud of level of inclusiveness this country has reached since its humble beginnings.

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