SELECTED LETTERS OF PRESIDENTS TO RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS, 1790-1802

Questions to Consider

1. *What are the similarities and differences in these letters to Washington, Adams and Jefferson?*
2. *Would you suggest the differences in the response letters are significant or not significant?*
3. *Why do you think the terms "civil and religious liberty" are used together so frequently?*
4. *How do you understand Jefferson's response to the Danbury Baptists?*

The Newport Clergy to George Washington, 17 August 1790

With salutations of the most cordial esteem and regard permit us the Clergy of the Town of Newport to approach your person, entreating your acceptance of our voice in conjunction with that of our fellow-citizens, to hail you welcome to Rhode Island.

Shielded by Omnipotence during a tedious and unnatural war—wise, as a messenger sent from Heaven, in conducting the counsels of the Cabinet—and under many embarrassments directing the operations of the field; divine Providence crown'd your temples with unfading laurels, and put into your hand the peacefully-waving olive-branch. Long may you live, Sir, highly favored of God and beloved of men, to preside in the grand Council of our Nation, which we trust will not cease to supplicate Heaven that its select and divine influences may descend and rest upon you, endowing you with grace, wisdom, and understanding to go out and in before this numerous and free people, to preside over whom divine Providence has raised you up.

And therefore before God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all the families both in Heaven and Earth are named—according to the law of our office, and in bounden duty—we bow our knee, beseeching him to grant you every temporal and spiritual blessing—and that, of the plentitude of his grace, all the families of these wide extended realms may enjoy under an equal and judicious administration of Government, peace and prosperity with all the blessings attendant on civil and religious liberty.

George Washington to the Clergy of Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790

Gentlemen,

The salutations of the Clergy of the Town of Newport on my arrival in the State of Rhode Island are rendered the more acceptable on account of the liberal sentiments and just ideas which they are known to entertain respecting civil and religious liberty.

I am inexpressibly happy that by the smiles of divine Providence, my weak but honest endeavors to serve my country have hitherto been crowned with so much success, and apparently given such satisfaction to those in whose cause they were exerted. The same benignant influence, together with the concurrent support of all real friends to their country will still be necessary to enable me to be in any degree useful to this numerous and free People over whom I am called to preside.

Wherefore I return you, Gentlemen, my hearty thanks for your solemn invocation of Almighty God that every temporal and spiritual blessing may be dispensed to me, and that, under my administration, the families of these States may enjoy peace and prosperity, with all the blessings attendant on civil and religious liberty—In the participation of which blessings may you have an ample Share.

G. Washington.

Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I. to George Washington, 17 August 1790

Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits—and to join with our fellow Citizens in welcoming you to New Port.

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, & danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle: and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine: This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual Confidence and Publick Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies Of Heaven and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Antient of Days, the great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: and, when like Joshua full of days and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

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.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the

Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

Go: Washington

The Convention of Massachusetts Congregational Ministers to the President John Adams, c. 1797

S I R,

WE the Congregational Ministers of your native State, met in annual convention, feel ourselves called upon as men, as American citizens, and as public professors and teachers of Christianity, to address you at this solemn and eventful crisis.

While the benevolent spirit of our religion and office prompts our fervent wishes and prayers for the universal extension of rational liberty, social order, and Christian piety, we cannot but deeply lament, and firmly resist those atheistical, licentious and disorganizing principles, which have been avowed and zealously propagated by the philosophers and politicians of France; which have produced the greatest crimes and miseries in that unhappy country, and like a mortal pestilence, are diffusing their baneful influence even to distant nations. From these principles, combined with boundless avarice and ambition, have originated not only schemes of universal plunder and domination, but insidious attempts to divide the American people from their rulers, and involve them in a needless, unjust and ruinous war; arbitrary and cruel depredations on their unoffending commerce; contemptuous treatment of their repeated messengers and generous overtures of peace; rapacious demands and insulting threats in answer to the most fair and condescending proposals.

In this connexion, we offer to you, fir, our tribute of affectionate esteem and gratitude, and to Almighty God, our devout praise, for the wise, temperate and benevolent policy, which has marked your conduct towards the offending power, and which has given a new and splendid example of the beauty and dignity of the Christian spirit, contrasted with the base and profligate spirit of firm, patriotic and important services to our country, from the dawn of its glorious revolution, and for the conspicuous integrity and wisdom which have been constantly displayed both by you, Sir, and your excellent and beloved predecessor.

As ministers of the Prince of Peace, we feel it to be our duty both to inculcate and exemplify the pacific spirit which adorns his character and doctrine. We remember his command to forgive and love our most injurious enemies. But neither the law of Christianity nor of reason requires us to prostrate our national independence, freedom, property and honor at the feet of proud insatiable oppressors; especially of a government, which has renounced the gospel and its sacred institutions, and has transfer red to imaginary or heathen idols, the homage due to the Creator and Redeemer of the world. Such a prostration would be treason against that Being who gave us our inestimable privileges civil and religious, as a sacred deposit to be defended and transmitted to posterity. It would be criminal unfaithfulness and treachery to our country, our children, and the whole human race.

The fate of Venice, and other countries subdued by France, though held up to intimidate us to degrading submission, shall teach us a far different lesson; it shall instruct us to shun that insidious embrace, which aims not only to reduce us to the condition of tributaries, but to strip us of the gospel, the Christian Sabbath and every pious institution. These privileges we consider as the chief glory of our country; the main pillars of its civil order, liberty and happiness; as on the other hand we view its excellent political institutions, as, under God, the guardians of our religious and

ecclesiastical privileges. This intimate connexion between our civil and Christian blessings, is alone sufficient to justify the decided part which the clergy of America have uniformly taken in supporting the constituted authorities and political interests of their country. While we forgive the censure which our order has received from some persons on this account, we will still, by our prayers and examples, by our public and private discourses, continue the same tenor of conduct which has incurred this malevolent or misguided abuse.

Amidst the fashionable skepticism and impiety of the age, it is matter of consolation and gratitude that we have a President, who, both in word and action, avows his reverence of the Christian religion, his belief in a Redeemer and Sanctifier of the world, and his devout trust in the providence of God. May that Being whose important favor you recently led us to implore, graciously answer our united prayers in behalf of our common country. May he preserve your valuable life and health, your vigor, firmness and integrity of mind, and your consequent public usefulness; and at length transfer you, full of days and honor, to the possession of an eminent and everlasting reward.

John Adams to the Convention of Congregational Ministers in the State of Massachusetts, c. 1797

GENTLEMEN,

THIS respectful and affectionate address, from the convention of the clergy of Massachusetts, not less distinguished for science and learning, candor, moderation, liberality of sentiment and conduct, and for the most amiable urbanity of manners, than for unblemished morals and Christian piety, does me great honor, and must have the most beneficial effects upon the public mind, at this solemn and eventful crisis. To do justice to its sentiments and language, I could only repeat it sentence by sentence, and word for word; I shall there fore confine myself to a mere return of my unfeigned thanks.

JOHN ADAMS.

The Danbury Baptist Association to Thomas Jefferson, c. 7 Oct. 1801

Sir,

Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your Election to office; we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoy'd in our collective capacity, since your Inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief Magistracy in the United States: And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompious than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, Sir to believe, that none are more sincere.

Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty—That Religion is at all times and places a Matter between God and Individuals—That no man aught to suffer in Name, person or effects on account of his religious Opinions—That the legetimate Power of civil Goverment extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbour: But Sir, our constitution of goverment is not specific. Our antient charter, together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted as the Basis of our goverment, At the time of our revolution; and such had been our Laws & usages, & such still are; that religion is consider'd as the first object of Legislation; & therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expence of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistant with the rights of freemen. It is not to be wondred at therefore; if those, who seek after power & gain under the pretence of goverment & Religion should reproach their fellow men—should reproach their chief Magistrate, as an enemy of religion Law &

good order because he will not, dares not assume the prerogative of Jehovah and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ.

Sir, we are sensible that the President of the united States, is not the national Legislator, & also sensible that the national goverment cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the Earth. Sir when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State out of that good will which he bears to the Millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for the arduous task which providence & the voice of the people have cal'd you to sustain and support you in your Administration against all the predetermin'd opposition of those who wish to rise to wealth & importance on the poverty and subjection of the people

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom throug Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.
Signed in behalf of the Association

Nehh. Dodge
Ephm. Robbins
Stephen S Nelson

Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association, 1 January 1802

GENTLEMEN

The affectionate sentiments of esteem and approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful & zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, & in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more and more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & your religious association, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Th: Jefferson