

HOUDINI AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Social Studies C.4.2 – Identify the documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, in which the rights of the citizens of our country are guaranteed.

Social Studies B.4.1 – Identify and examine various sources of information that are used for constructing an understanding of the past, such as artifacts, documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, paintings, architecture, oral presentations, graphs, and charts.

Social Studies E.8.12 – Explain how beliefs and practices, such as ownership of property or status at birth may lead to conflict among people of different regions in cultures and give examples of such conflicts that have and have not been resolved.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America guarantees Americans the freedom of religion:

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.

What does this mean? According to the First Amendment, there can be no “official religion” of the United States. Americans are not required to practice a government-approved religion and can follow their own religious beliefs. Also, the government cannot stop people from practicing their religion – each person can choose what faith or beliefs to follow. Therefore, even religions with which we disagree or don’t understand are protected under the Constitution of the United States. This includes a religion like Spiritualism which many people find strange today.

In early 1926, Houdini supported an anti-fortune telling bill that came before Congress. The bill made it illegal to charge money for telling fortunes – that is to tell people what their future will hold – in the District of Columbia. This was something that Spiritualist mediums regularly did during séances. According to Houdini, mediums in the District of Columbia could purchase a license for \$25.00 that would allow them to hold séances and tell fortunes. He noted that many mediums were frauds, charging money to the sitters at a séance and then using sleight of hand and trickery to make the sitter believe that the spirit of a loved one had been contacted. Mediums that were frauds also provided sitters with information about the future. The sitters gave up their money to the mediums, believing in their ability to contact spirits and tell fortunes, when it was really just a hoax. Houdini saw these mediums as con-men and women. He did not see the bill as limiting religious activity but as preventing crime.

What do you think?

Houdini's Comments

“Washington is the only place where you can buy a license for \$25 with which to blackmail and rob the public. You are protecting those fortune tellers who under different *guises* (outward appearances or disguises) and titles pretend to see things in the future.”

“This is positively no attack upon a religion . . . I respect every genuine believer in Spiritualism or any other religion as long as it does not conflict with the laws of the country or the laws of humanity.”

What the Spiritualists and the Bill's Opponents Said

“*Prophecy* (a prediction about the future made with the help of the spirits), spiritual guidance, and advice are the very foundation of our religion, and to deny a spiritual minister the right to advise his followers is to *curtail* (to cut short or reduce) their privileges as ministers of their religion.” – Mrs. Jane B. Coates, a Spiritualist, Washington D.C.

“This bill strikes at the most vital part of our religion, for if it becomes law it will *muzzle* (to keep someone from expressing him or herself) our mediums, who are the *exponents* (people who speak for or represent something) of our religion, and without whom our religion cannot exist. The work of our mediums in giving private interviews, in which they exercise the gifts of *prophecy* . . . and the *discerning* (understanding) of spirits is as vital as part of our religion as that of the religious exercises of the representatives of any other religion, for which money is paid directly or indirectly.” – Alfred H. Terry, Pastor of the First Spiritualist Church of Washington D.C.

- 1) If you had been in the House of Representatives in 1926, would you have voted for or against this bill?
- 2) Do you think the bill is Constitutional? Cite evidence to support your answer.
- 3) What is your opinion on fortune telling? Explain.