

Religious Freedom—Cornerstone of Democracy

By
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As I kneel in church, I glance over to my father and grandmother who kneel beside each other. Hands clasped, my father's head hangs low, eyes closed. His lips silently mouth the words of a prayer. The ridges on his forehead; the wrinkles of worry, show concern and thought. I glance yet again at his hands. They show signs of wear, old age, and hardship, telling a story about toil, adversity, and efforts to escape Vietnam. Each wrinkle spells out a word—those words come together to describe his journey from Vietnam to America.

I gaze past my father and see my grandmother, clutching rosary beads in her hands. She rolls each bead between frail fingers as she recites silent prayers. The smooth beads glisten and reflect the candlelight from the altar. She has had these beads her entire life and held them tight with every tribulation. She shares my father's story. Each bead represents a page in a book, recounting my grandmother's hardships and flight from her home in Vietnam...

In history class, we focus on learning and memorizing the political aspects of the Vietnam War—the decisions this president made or the actions that general made, rather than learning about the Vietnamese civilians themselves. The glimpse of a woman crying and clutching to her child as soldiers loom near, the people scrambling over the embassy wall before the communists took over, or the sight of a monk setting himself ablaze into a ball of flames—a martyr for a cause that he held deep inside—these are the real, honest, frightening, and unromanticized accounts of the Vietnam war. They fled from these scenes of despair to preserve principles they held dear to their hearts and which would have been in jeopardy had my father and grandmother stayed when the communists took over. The principles of letting them choose who to revere, what to worship, and what to believe.

The major difference between American and Vietnam can be summarized in a few simple words written on paper: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (Constitution, Amendment 1). Having been born in America, I often take these words for granted. I kneel in my pew at church without worry, without fear; yet at the same time elsewhere, a man kneels on a cold floor, begging for his life, with a gun pointed to his head. He is not allowed the free will to choose his religion. It is these images that are precious to me and all Americans, whether native or naturalized. To my father and grandmother, these words sparkle like diamonds. They are security and protection. A sense of safety not felt in Vietnam, where fear was an ever present factor—the fear of kneeling, head bowed in prayer, and then to look up to see doors bursting open and soldiers and police rushing in.

The trek to America was not an easy one. They had to leave everything they knew behind. As new citizens, they signed an oath. An oath which partially read “I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same...” They had pledged to uphold the principles in the Constitution; a plethora of principles, including the one principle they held dearest to their hearts—the principle to freely worship their own choice of religion. The right to go to church each Sunday and pray, head bowed, rosaries in hand, with no fears. A principle to be able to think as one pleases and be able to voice these opinions and have their voice heard—regardless of what religious denominations one belongs to. The freedom of religion, the freedom of thought, and the right to voice these thoughts—this is what allowed Martin Luther King Jr. to use religion as a platform for equality. America was built on these principles by design. Many colonials fled Europe in order to escape the religious persecution and the restrictions placed on the freedom to choose their own religion that they faced back home. These experiences helped to mold America into what it is today—a democracy where freedoms, for all, soar high.

I look over at my father and grandmother, who are still kneeling. The doors of the church open from behind. I turn my head and look back. I do not take notice of the people walking in, but instead I catch a glimpse of the American flag which flies high in front of our church. Looking at this flag, I’m reminded of the national anthem. “Oh, say! Does that star-spangled banner yet wave O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” (Star Spangled Banner, Francis Scott Key) My parents are unfamiliar with these words. They do not know the words by heart. Nonetheless, they understand what it means because they can *feel* its importance. The anthem represents the sacrifices made for this country by our forefathers to preserve the principles of freedom—just as my parents had paid a high price coming to America to preserve the freedoms they cherished. These principles of freedom are preserved in our democratic nation so that all—immigrants of all backgrounds and U.S. born citizens of all ethnic and religious upbringing—may cherish them. My father still puts his hand over his heart when he hears the anthem, although his mouth remains silent—for it is in his heart where he can feel the anthem ring true the loudest. For it is the principle he held in his heart—the freedom of religion—that pushed him to come to America to preserve it. But really, what it was, was not an issue of attending established churches or being a member of an officially recognized religion—it was about believing what he believed—thinking what he thought—and then the ability to voice those thoughts.

It was an issue that began with religion—but which evolved into democracy; the cornerstone of our nation.

Note: The above won first place oratory competition held by the Richmond based Council for America’s First Freedom held in 2001.