

## Hannah Dake Freedom of Religion piece for the Rossi Center

In 1791 American citizens gained one of the most important documents in our history, the Bill of Rights. These 10 amendments were created to protect the civil liberties of people in a way unheard of under the British rule. The first amendment promises us freedom of speech, religion and the press, three areas where people were continually silenced in the British government. With the Bill of Rights, everything changed for Americans, and history began forging a new course. Today I am going to reflect on freedom of religion specifically, discussing the background, impact and implications of it in our modern world.

Before freedom of religion was guaranteed by the first amendment, religion and society were often entangled in a negative way. In the 16th century, the Spaniards colonized Florida. When they arrived here they met many people who were not religious, and who did not believe or practice the Catholic faith as many of them did. These non-believers were unjustly killed for their presumed wrong beliefs. Similarly, in the 17th century settlement of the Massachusetts Bay colony, people were excluded who did not conform religiously. This colony was strict on Puritan teaching, and those who differed were left to fend for themselves. By pressuring people to choose religion, societies were damaging both the sacredness of religious practices and fundamental communal relationships. It was in 1776 that Thomas Jefferson finally saw how costly this practice of religious conformity was, and began the process of passing a bill to end it. Jefferson worked on a committee with three other men to draft the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and after appearing before the General Assembly, it was ultimately approved in 1786 (Ragosta).

Five years after this momentous approval, the aforementioned Bill of Rights was also recognized. Freedom of religion was now duly approved, but still took time to be fairly regulated. Governing bodies were, and often still are, unsure of how far freedom of religion extends into the public sphere. An early example comes from the 1878 case of *Reynolds vs. United States*, where the supreme court voted on matters of polygamy. The court decided that not only was polygamy wrong, but also that freedom of religion did not ban the government from regulating marriage. Many wondered, and still do, how freedom of religion does not promise marriage in any desired form. Another instance of uncertainty comes from cases in the early twentieth century where Native American children were banned from wearing religious artifacts at the boarding schools they were sent to for assimilation (History.com). Freedom of religion was granted to everyone, but at a school where kids were learning to assimilate to the white man's ways, this freedom seemed to only be extended to certain people.

Freedom of religion is a right that *all* American citizens are entitled to, no matter their race, ethnicity or class. This freedom is one that we all can cherish today thanks to the rich history and unending perseverance from our forefathers. In the modern world, freedom of religion looks very different than the way it did back in Thomas Jefferson's time. People are no longer excluding others from neighborhoods for practicing different religions or actively killing those opposed to their beliefs.

Instead, freedom of religion is used to protect people from denying their religions in places like schools, hospitals and workplaces. Growing up, I attended a private, Catholic school. Because the government cannot subsidize religious schooling, my parents funded these fundamental years of my education. While a big sacrifice, my parents say they would do it again because, through freedom of religion, I was able to attend mass, adoration and prayer services during school hours. At public schools, things are completely different. Religion is not supposed to be mentioned, with some places going so far as to take out 'One nation under God' from the Pledge of Allegiance (Lyons). In my Catholic education, the Bill of Rights granted me the freedom to learn about chemistry, English, economics and God simultaneously, a gift I will always be thankful for.

Modern freedom of religion can also protect healthcare workers from performing tasks conflicting with their religious beliefs. Doctors, nurses and other staff have important roles in aiding society, and most of the time their work can be carried out without their personal lives coming into play. However, there are some times when certain procedures that healthcare workers are asked to perform and allocate for are incompatible with their beliefs, such as abortions or vasectomies. A 2018 case was brought before the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) by Sandra Rojas, who said that she was forced out of her job three years earlier because she would not recommend abortions or clinics that performed them. Sandra had been working at the Winnebago County Health Department in Illinois for 18 years before her new supervisor decided to let her go for her moral objections to her work (Braun). Discrimination like this directly contradicted Sandra's freedom of religion, and by taking her case to court she showed everyone that while the Constitution promises you freedom, sometimes it does not always deliver it. Thankfully, also in 2018, the HHS underwent administration changes, and the new governance was 'working to protect health practitioners who decline patients or refrain from conducting certain procedures based on their moral or religious convictions' (Berkeley Center for Religion). With people like Sandra Rojas and the committee at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services standing up for our freedom of religion, the future ahead of us not only looks bright, but also liberating.

The history of freedom of religion in America is a complicated one. It does not read as a clear, straightforward success story, but instead is one chalked full of contrasting moments. Progress and regression, acceptance and rejection both go hand in hand when recounting our right to religion as Americans. Perhaps it is because we did not come by this freedom easily, but fought tirelessly to obtain it, that we truly appreciate what it means to have freedom of religion. Let us never forget these sacrifices that brought us to where we are now, and may we move forward only progressing in our acceptance of others and their religions.

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