

Korea Times: Religious freedom is not a reward for the theologically correct

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Unification Church leader Han Hak-ja is seen in a wheelchair in front of the Seoul District Court on Sept. 1. Yonhap

Not long ago, Pastor Joshua Holmes - a young American Unificationist - visited a large evangelical church in Seoul. He arrived in a spirit of goodwill, hoping for understanding at a moment when several Korean religious leaders, including Pastor Son Hyun Bo and Unification leader Han Hak-ja, also known as Holy Mother Han, faced investigation and even pretrial detention. But after Pastor Holmes spoke about the universal value of religious freedom, a church elder cut him off with a chilling statement: "Religious freedom is precious - but your church does not deserve religious freedom."

That sentence has echoed in my mind ever since. It reflects a dangerous misconception. Religious liberty is not a reward bestowed on the theologically correct. It is a safeguard for all of us - especially for those whose beliefs others may find unacceptable. The moment we decide that one faith is unworthy of protection, we begin dismantling the very principle that keeps every faith safe.

History offers stark warnings. The pilgrims crossed the Atlantic to escape persecution by the Church of England, only to replicate intolerance in the New World. Puritans executed Quakers. Catholics and other dissenters were barred from certain colonies. And yet, through painful trial and error, Americans learned that no single church can set the terms of belonging in a diverse society.

The First Amendment emerged from this hard-won insight. It rejected the old habit of using government

power to enforce religious "correctness." It declared, instead, that faith must stand on the strength of its own persuasion.

Benjamin Franklin embodied that spirit. Near the end of his life, he wrote to Yale President Ezra Stiles that he found the essence of "sound religion" in any sect that honored God, did good to others and recognized moral accountability. Franklin refused to police doctrinal boundaries. He cared about conscience, compassion and character - things that unite, not divide.

Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the late spouse of Han Hak-ja, lived out this same ethic. In the early days of his ministry in Korea, a pastor falsely accused him. Some followers urged him to sue. But Reverend Moon recalled Joseph in Genesis forgiving the brothers who had betrayed him. Just as Joseph chose gratitude over vengeance, Reverend Moon chose reconciliation. He remembered that Christians had carried Jesus' message for 2,000 years, often at the cost of their lives. He felt indebted to that legacy, not entitled to retaliate against it.

My own life was shaped by this perspective. In 1971, disillusioned by U.S. foreign and defense policy, I moved to France. There, after encountering Father and Mother Moon, I came to appreciate their profound love for the United States - not because it is flawless, but because its ideals have inspired the constitutions of other nations far beyond its borders. The Moons honored the courage of early settlers who risked everything to practice the face of their choice. They revered the spirit of Nathan Hale, who declared before his execution that his only regret was having but one life to give for his country.

After Reverend Moon's passing in 2012, Holy Mother Han continued to return to the U.S. - even though the country had once imprisoned her husband. She, too, chose forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reverend Moon and Holy Mother Han have expressed deep love for Korea and great pride in the beauty of Korean Christianity - its dawn prayers, its martyrs, its spiritual devotion. That is why it is so painful today to hear some within that same tradition argue that Unificationists do not "deserve" religious freedom. Such thinking contradicts the very democratic values and Christian legacy that helped shape modern Korea.

Pastor Martin Niemöller's warning still rings with urgency:

"...they came for the Jews,
And I did not speak out -
Because I was not a Jew...
Then they came for me -
And there was no one left to speak out for me."

Religious freedom is not reliant on doctrinal agreement and the erosion of such liberty never begins with the majority. It begins with a small, disfavored group that people find easy to dismiss. When society decides that some believers don't deserve freedom, it sets a precedent to deny it to everyone else as well.

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