Religious freedom exhibit set to open

'Religious freedom is still an imperfect struggle'

Wednesday, Sep 19, 2007 - 12:08 AM Updated: 01:15 PM

By JANET CAGGIANO
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Isabelle Kinnard never thought of Wounded Knee as a fight for religious freedom.

But when she studied the 1890 massacre in more detail, she said, she realized religion had everything to do with it.

Tensions already were high between the Sioux Indians, confined to reservations, and the U.S. military, charged with keeping them there. In an attempt to return to their glory days, many Sioux sought deliverance in a new mysticism preached by a Paiute shaman. To accelerate their salvation, the Indians danced the Ghost Dance, causing panic in the white community. U.S. troops attacked, slaughtering more than 300.

"Religious freedom is still an imperfect struggle," said Kinnard, who holds a doctorate in church history from the College of William and Mary. "It's not easy. It's not always pretty. People aren't always going to have beliefs you agree with."

But everyone should be free to worship as they wish, Kinnard said, provided they are not a threat to society. That's the message behind "Faces of Religious Freedom," an exhibit organized by the Council for America's First Freedom. Opening tonight at the First Freedom Center in downtown Richmond, it explores the lives and the deeds of those who have helped define the concept of religious freedom.

"This is not to say that all religion is nice," said Kinnard, the exhibit curator and the council's vice president for education. "We are not defending all religions. But you have the right to your opinions. We need to avoid those blanket generalizations that impoverish you as a society."

. . .

This marks the first exhibit for the council, founded in 1984 to promote understanding and respect for diverse religious communities.

"This is an issue that is sometimes faceless," said Bob Seiple, president of the Council for America's First Freedom. "It is seen in this country as a legal issue, a constitutional issue. In every other part of the world, it is seen not through the courts, but through oppressed people."

Statues of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison overlook the exhibit and the developments in religious freedom that have ensued since the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786.

To their left is "Clash of Cultures," which illustrates how religious freedom today remains controversial. The faces of Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham and Sun Myung Moon (founder of the Unification Church) are featured here.

Another component of "Faces" is panels of everyday people around the world experiencing the anguish, joy, liberation and reverence of religious observance.

• • •

A darker element focuses on wars and rumors of war. Even as religious freedom has been recognized as a human right, blood continues to be shed over religious differences. Terrorism stands in the way of peace.

"Because of events around the world, we have a very nervous Muslim community," Seiple said. "They are the ones who take an hour to go through security lines. They are the ones on the watch list. Should another 9/11 happen, the moderate voice could disappear. When that happens, you have only the extreme voice left."

Terrorist acts understandably put religious freedom to the test, Kinnard said. "Faces" addresses this development in detail by examining how religious minorities are treated.

"How well do we really protect religious views that are not the norm?" Kinnard asked. "It's hard to put up with beliefs you don't agree with. But you have to, because it gives you greater strength as a nation."

Kinnard hopes those who visit the exhibit will examine their own views on what religious freedom truly means.

"Respect is different than approval," she said. "But respect is the only thing that will get us to peace."
Contact Janet Caggiano at (804) 649-6157 or jcaggiano@timesdispatch.com.

Go Back

News | Sports | Entertainment | Living | Shopping/Classifieds | Weather | Opinion | Obituaries | Services/Contact Us
© 2007, Media General Inc. All Rights Reserved. Terms & Conditions | Site Map
-- Part of the GatewayVa Network --
webmaster@inrich.com