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Evading Oligarchy

The Virginia Statute for Religious freedom states “... no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced ... in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.” The liberty to practice and believe whichever faith one chooses is a right highly valued in this country. Democracy is founded on the idea that everyone has equal political power, regardless of differences in genetics, upbringing, or wealth, and honoring that is impossible if faith has a place in our government. Consider this, if one religion is primarily recognized in the democracy, it is nearly impossible for minorities to be equally represented. American citizens have established the general importance of the presence of the law, so now we must examine where it must be practiced with fidelity in the U.S. In the following paragraphs the separation of church and state will be examined holistically and within specific annals of our democracy.

We must begin by clarifying some of the particulars of the law. The government is not prohibited to recognize the existence

of religion and accommodate for it, it is only barred from showing preference to a specific faith. The U.S. government is also not required to keep faith out of the public eye. The freedom of religion is connected to liberty of speech, as one cannot be persecuted for discussing and demonstrating religion in the public view, unless said demonstration is violent or threatening. In short, church and state cannot rule over each other; religion cannot be political. Thomas Jefferson wrote the laws that described freedom of religion as found in the First Amendment, as well as other legal documents relating to the separation of church and state. He began in 1786 by authoring a passage in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which was a foundation for much of the section of the First Amendment concerning the preservation of a secular nation. We owe much of our liberty concerning faith to Thomas Jefferson.

As we broaden our understanding of our freedom, we should look into some of the systems and people central to any democracy. We shall begin with education. Public schools are pools of diversity. Children of dozens of different faiths coming together to learn about the intricacies of a world that has a large basis in faith. These same children are going out into the world to vote and influence the United States. If one religion is favored in curriculums, then minority faiths will not be represented in our country, as students will only be educated through the lense of a single belief. In the case of *McCullum v. Board of Education* in 1947, a school district in Illinois was allowing and helping a private religious organization offer optional religious classes as an alternative to normal, secular classes. Vashti McCollum, as a

taxpayer and resident of the district and as a mother with a child enrolled in the public school system, claimed that this policy was discriminatory and unconstitutional under the separation of church and state. The district and state courts ruled on the side of the school district, so McCollum appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled on the side of McCollum, because of laws that state “No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups, and *vice versa*.” These laws expressly prohibit public schools from endorsing or teaching religion.

Democracies are made to represent *everyone*. A diverse country like the United States cannot show preference for any specific qualification of a person, as minorities are imperative to the effectiveness of our government. It therefore cannot be ignored that each religion has certain ordinances on its followers' actions, and specific opinions on the actions of humans in society. Take abortions, for example. Abortion plays a large part in Christianity and other religions, yet laws passed by Congress concerning abortions affect every citizen of the United States. Women should be able to make their own choices concerning their bodies, and faith can play a part in individual decisions, however, it is a completely different story if the government is regulating women's bodies based on a religion that not every female shares. It is a similar story with LGBT rights. Each faith has its own specific values and teachings concerning the gender

and sexuality of its followers. It is imperative that each faith, and even its absence, are considered equal within our democracy for the sake of accurate representation of each individual human who resides in “the land of the free.”

Preserving democracy is our duty in this idealistic country. We must constantly fight against the magnetic pull towards dictatorship or oligarchy. This is what makes the separation of church and state so instrumental to keeping a true democracy. Having one faith largely represented in government is common practice of monarchs and oligarchs, which are the very systems our founders fought so hard to escape. Faith dictates how citizens act, but it should not be present the hallways of federal buildings. We must raise our children to respect and protect diversity, in our schools and in our press, in our laws and in our debates. Democracy is based on the individual, and beliefs are an integral part of anyone’s identity. These identities are all created equal, and they must be viewed equally in government, for the sake of my rights and yours.