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Politically Correct Prayer–The Secular Left Goes Berserk

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Acting as his own lawyer, Newdow filed two separate suits in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California. One suit is yet another attempt to secularize the Pledge of Allegiance, the other suit is his effort to prevent the delivery of prayers in the course of the official presidential inaugural ceremonies. In his filing, Newdow charged that the prayers offered at the 2001 inauguration made him feel like a “second-class citizen.”

According to Religion News Service, Newdow referred to himself when he argued, “He—like all Americans—has a right to view his government in action without being forced to confront governmental endorsement of religious dogma with which he disagrees.”

The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia has scheduled a hearing on the case for January 14. Just last year, Newdow lost a similar effort when a previous case was thrown out when a court ruled that he lacked standing. You can’t accuse Newdow of giving up easily.

In this suit, Newdow argues that prayers offered at official government ceremonies are categorically unconstitutional. As an atheist, he is offended by any prayer, offered in any words, by any person on a government platform. His case isn’t likely to get anywhere, given the previous court’s ruling that he lacked standing to bring the suit. Then again, given the activist bent of some federal judges—who knows?

But if Michael Newdow wants to ban prayers altogether, others just want to make sure that the 2004 inauguration will feature less “exclusionary” prayers than those offered at the 2001 ceremony. What made these folks so upset?

As expected, the inaugural ceremonies for President George W. Bush in 2001 opened and closed with prayer. Unexpectedly, the prayers ignited controversy and unleashed a firestorm of histrionics from the secular left.

Franklin Graham, evangelist son of Billy Graham, and Kirbyjon Caldwell, a leading Houston pastor, had the temerity to pray as Christians—even invoking the name of Jesus Christ. Are you shocked? Is this not what President Bush had in mind when inviting these persons to pray? Is this not what we should expect from two Christian ministers?

Evidently not, so far as the watchdogs of secularism and political correctness are concerned. The leading salvo came from Alan Dershowitz, the vituperative law professor from Harvard. Dershowitz was outraged by the prayers, and accused the Bush administration of subverting the Constitution. There can be no “official sectarian prayer,” avowed Dershowitz. “That is what the 1st Amendment is all about, the very first act by the new administration was in defiance of our Constitution.”

Prayer in defiance of the Constitution? Well, rally the militia and unleash the ACLU! Did Dershowitz mean to be

taken seriously? It would appear so. Furthermore, he represents a growing antagonism to all genuine religious expression in the public square.

Dershowitz was not alone. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United—a liberal group that advocates a strict separation of church and state—called the prayers “inappropriate and insensitive.” The New Republic magazine claimed to speak for “Americans of good will” who deny “that God has any place at all in the rituals of this open society.” The magazine referred to the prayers offered by Franklin Graham and Kirbyjon Caldwell as “crushing Christological thuds.” Well, one man’s thud is another man’s thunder.

First, let’s set the record straight. The prayers offered by Franklin Graham and Kirbyjon Caldwell did not constitute any state establishment of religion. They prayed as Christians ought always to pray, and their prayers followed in a proud inaugural tradition.

Given the outcry from Dershowitz and company, you might think that Jesus had never been invoked in an inauguration ceremony. This is hardly the case, as prayers in the name of Jesus have been a staple of inaugurations past—including the inaugurations of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Billy Graham has been a participant in such ceremonies for decades, and no one is surprised when he prays in Jesus’ name.

The sad fact is that for some time the secular left has been attempting to eradicate all genuine religious expression from public life. According to the legislators of political correctness, it is allowable only to offer “non-sectarian” prayers. Of course, a nonsectarian prayer is not a prayer at all. Are we supposed to address our public prayers to the great “To Whom it May Concern?”

Several years ago, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (in keeping with their desire to be nonsectarian, the group is now known only as “The National Conference”) suggested guidelines for praying in public. Such opportunities call for general prayers, according to the guidelines, and allow “persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.”

Accordingly, there is no mention of any God in particular. The group suggested alternatives like, “Our Maker” or “Source of Being.” Suggested closing phrases included “Hear our Prayer” or “May Goodness Flourish.” To that we would suggest, “You must be kidding.”

These suggestions are an equal insult to all religions. A Christian ought to pray as a Christian, whether in public or private. The same is true for Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Unitarians, or any others. Prayer to a general deity is an offense to faith, and calls for “non-sectarian” prayers betray a misunderstanding of prayer itself.

Professor Dershowitz holds to a rather extreme view of the Constitution—but to a downright bizarre view of prayer. Does he really believe that a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Buddhist can join together in the same prayer? The Buddhist does not even believe in a personal deity.

Dershowitz’s fervor on this issue is especially perplexing, given the fact that he identifies as a Jew by tradition, but as an agnostic in belief. What kind of prayer would complement his brand of Jewish agnosticism? Perhaps a prayer to the non-existent God?

A Christian minister who prays non-Christian prayers betrays the Gospel. A Jew should be expected to pray as a Jew, and a Muslim as a Muslim. The same is true for all religions and their believers. This is the true promise of the 1st Amendment, and the true fulfillment of religious liberty.

The Constitution guarantees freedom to exercise religion—not to hide behind a mask of generic religiosity. As former senator [and current Ambassador to the United Nations] John Danforth once stated, authentic prayer “is almost by definition sectarian prayer.”

This can be a hard pill to swallow. Those offended by hearing the prayers of other religions had better get used to it. Freedom for Christians to pray Christian prayers is also freedom for Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and all others to pray in accordance with their own beliefs. Anything less is sham religion and hollow constitutional promises.

William Willimon, now the United Methodist Bishop of North Alabama, once commented that he had tried for a time

to pray non-sectarian prayers, but he stopped this experiment when a student told him that he “sounded less like a Christian minister and more like a crew member on the starship Enterprise.”

The secular left is never bothered by New Age prayers to the “Force” or the “Source.” They erupt only when a sincere believer of a particular faith prays a particular prayer in his or her particular way—and in public, of all things.

If Michael Newdow is successful in his litigation, there will be no prayers at this month’s presidential inauguration. If Alan Dershowitz and his band of secular ideologues have their way, the public square will be swept clean of authentic religious expression. When that happens, it will be back to the catacombs for Christians.

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