

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Public prayer and religious freedom

Many members of the Texas legislature are very conservative Christians because many Texans are, especially outside major cities. These legislators' efforts to impose their religious views on all Texans are a frequent source of dismay for those of us who don't share their views, and who believe that the U.S. Constitution forbids government from promoting particular religious views.



Austin American-Statesman columnist Ken Herman has let readers know about some of the most blatant of these efforts, most recently the prayers that open each legislative session. In a column that I wrote about in the [March 2013 Connections](#), Herman, who is Jewish, commented on the preponderance of Christ-centered invocations. To him, as to me and many other Texans, these seem totally inappropriate, if not actually illegal in a nation that supposedly protects religious freedom and separation of church and state. What Herman found most disconcerting was that legislators who objected to the prayers rarely expressed their objections openly, presumably because doing so could cause enmity that would make it even harder to do their job.

A brave stand for diversity

Recently, however, one brave legislator broke this pattern, setting a rare example. Representative Donna Howard, a Unitarian Universalist from Austin, dared to give a nonsectarian invocation.

She began by acknowledging that the Texas House, like the state, includes adherents of many religious traditions and of none. She optimistically reminded her fellow legislators that they came together around "common values of equality and justice and working for the common good."



Freedom only for some Christians?

In Fourth of July observances, we may hear a lot about "religious freedom" this year. But many currently campaigning on that slogan seem to want freedom only for those who share their interpretation of Christianity. To me, that's anything but free.



Discrimination on religious grounds

The U.S. Catholic Church, for example, is observing what it calls a Fortnight of Freedom, from June 21 to July 4. Bishops describe it as "a two-week period of prayer and action to address many current challenges to religious liberty."

One challenge they want addressed is an August 1 deadline for religiously affiliated organizations such as charities, schools, universities, and hospitals (but not churches) to comply with a mandate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), requiring employers to offer health insurance that covers services such as contraception and sterilization. I see that mandate as *ensuring* the religious liberty of employees to make their own decisions about health care. By analogy, I would hope that other faiths could not prevent insurers from covering, say, blood transfusions or surgery.

Many conservative Catholics and evangelicals are also currently organizing in explicit opposition to gay marriage and abortion. A draconian law soon to be passed in Texas, for example, threatens to close dozens of women's clinics, many of which primarily provide preventive care and contraception. Where is the religious freedom of low-income women to receive basic care and make their own health decisions?

What do July 4 services worship?

When July 4 services feature military groups and flags, do worshipers feel free to pray for nonviolence and an end to war? When taxpayer-sponsored parades and fireworks feature Christian prayers and anthems, can Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and the nonreligious really believe that they have equal protection? On this Independence Day, let us continue to ensure religious freedom for all Americans, not just some.



Silence for praying or not praying

“Before we begin the important business of this session,” Howard then asked her House colleagues, “let us collectively observe a moment of silence while we individually look to whatever source we choose and invoke guidance and inspiration for the work before us and the decisions we will be making.” Then there were 15 seconds of silence, Ken Herman reports, during which lawmakers and visitors were free to pray or not to pray, as they chose. Rep. Howard ended the silence by saying, “Thank you, members.”



Is private prayer insufficient?

Immediate criticism came from conservative Christian legislators. As soon as the invocation ended, Ken Herman reports in the June 2 *Statesman*, several legislators announced that it didn’t even qualify as a prayer. Then some House members got together for an impromptu, post-invocation prayer session—for what they considered legitimate prayer.



When Herman asked these members why they had felt it was necessary to have their own prayer session after Rep. Howard’s invocation, one explained, “It wasn’t about it being necessary. ... It was some guys came over and said, ‘Hey, y’all want to pray together?’ ” So they did that, right then and there in the House chamber as the session was beginning. “It was kind of a spontaneous deal,” this legislator assured Herman. “It wasn’t something that was premeditated.”

Several legislators also tweeted. One wrote, “I never knew what an invocation delivered by an atheist would look like. That was terrible.” Another called it bizarre. One even called it godless. Does he feel that, for example, AA meetings are godless because they allow members to invoke an unnamed “higher power”? Does he believe that God understands only one name? Is a prayer valid only if we address it explicitly to “God” and mention the name “Jesus,” like a kind of magical incantation? Such ritualistic, literalistic thinking was typical of earlier human cultures, even up to the Enlightenment. But it distresses



me to see it among modern politicians who are responsible for making sober, rational decisions about the lives of over 26 million Texans.

That figure includes, by recent estimates, some 650,000 Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs—around 2.5% of the whole. Indeed, a 2001 CUNY survey cited in Wikipedia found that 11% of Texans gave “no religion” as their religious identification—the third largest group after Catholics and Baptists. 11% could now be close to 3 million people.

Prayer that urges conversion

In stark contrast to Rep. Howard’s invocation in the Texas House, Ken Herman reports, the pastor who gave the invocation in the Texas Senate that same day said this: “Father, I pray especially that each member of the Senate here, each member of their family, Father, would come to a lively faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Does that sound to you like a prayer that values the religious freedom that our Constitution claims to protect? It doesn’t to me, and it didn’t to Ken Herman. “Imagine the uproar,” he commented, “if a non-Christian offering a legislative invocation ever urged people to find faith in a non-Christian deity.”



Where’s the uproar over sectarianism?

Why aren’t more Christians making an uproar, I wonder, about such blatantly sectarian practices that are happening regularly both in states and the U.S. Congress, when the Constitution forbids governments from imposing any religion? Why don’t more people also protest when school-sponsored events and local government meetings open with prayers that implicitly belittle people of other faiths?



Unfortunately, the uproar that we hear Christians making is more often of the opposite kind. Many insist that public, oral Christian prayer *should* be offered regularly in public schools, at school events, and in government meetings such as city council sessions. They mistakenly claim that the U.S. was created by and for Christians just like them, so they apparently believe that it provides religious freedom only for Christians just like them.

Jesus warned against public prayer

What seems very odd about these Christians' pleas is that such prayer is the opposite of what the

Bible shows Jesus as having advocated. How can the very Christians who most adamantly claim that all Bible verses are commands from God feel free to ignore Jesus's teaching about prayer?

I'm baffled by that, and by claims that court rulings can harm

our nation by preventing prayer in schools, causing sinfulness and decline. No one can prevent anyone from praying. Silent, private prayer, following Jesus's example of humility, is always possible.

Why pray aloud at secular gatherings?

Why include prayer at nonreligious events anyway? Why do we open athletic events, government meetings, and other secular activities with spoken prayer? Even if the majority of participants are Christians, as they're likely to be in the U.S., they won't all see God in the same way, or have the same views about what prayer accomplishes or how God wants each person to pray. And the U.S. Constitution was intended to protect all citizens, whether they're in the religious majority or not, from being included in religious practices they don't support.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them ...



“Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. ...

“Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret ...”

—Matthew 6:1-6

An unneighborly use of Bible verses

Shouldn't protection of that freedom also apply to the official display of Bible verses at public, secular events? A recent legal challenge from the Texas town of Kountze raised this question. At public-school football games, cheerleaders were using banners containing Bible verses to greet players as they ran onto the field. At a nonreligious event, where people with a variety of religious beliefs ought to be able to take part and feel welcome, that seems totally out of place—especially because it will inevitably appear to be not the expression of a few individuals, but an official statement approved by the school district. Sadly, a judge ruled that no law prevents using religious-themed banners at school events.



But why did this use of Bible-verse banners have to be evaluated by a court?

Why didn't local churchgoers see that it was inappropriate and discourage this unfriendly use of Bible verses? Even if the whole team had been Christian, I have to wonder why it apparently didn't occur to any of the students, teachers, or parents that God surely does not care who wins a football game. What vanity to think that God is cheering for your own church or team, when people are homeless, hungry, elderly, ill, alone! Such issues need to be addressed openly from Christian pulpits and in church classes.

The world has changed

In earlier years when a higher proportion of the U.S. population was Christian, and when scholarly findings about the origin and nature of religions and their sacred documents were less widely known, it was understandable for many Christians to think that

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Christianity contained the only God-given truth. Maybe it was even understandable for Christians to feel called by God to convert everyone. But we now know that no religion or its sacred document has a monopoly on truth. In a world of growing diversity, we can see that Jesus's command to love our neighbors must mean loving people of all faiths and none.



Jesus's example calls us to respect others as we wish them to respect us, even when we disagree. So if Christians insist on having only their beliefs, prayers, and scriptures publicly presented at secular events, and government-sponsored religious events

such as prayer breakfasts, we can now see that that is not only unrealistic, but also arrogant and unkind—in fact, unchristian.

One of the most Christian things that we Christians could do now, therefore, might be to encourage the secular groups that we belong to, and the governments of our nation, states, and cities, to stop opening their gatherings with prayer. Or at the very least, let it be silent prayer whose words can be chosen by each individual who is present, reflecting his or her own religious beliefs and not imposing those on anyone else.

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Cheerleading for a “Merry Christmas” law—a contest among holidays?

Surrounded by sleigh-bell-ringing Santa Claus impersonators, Texas governor Rick Perry recently signed a law claiming to protect Christmas and other holiday celebrations in Texas public schools from legal challenges. Also present at the signing ceremony were cheerleaders from Kountze High School, whose flagrantly sectarian use of Bible-verse banners at football games had recently been declared permissible by a judge, and one surely atypical rabbi who claimed he thought of it as the “Happy Hanukkah” law. The bill’s sponsor, a Houston Republican representative, said he drafted it after finding that his son’s school had felt it must call its Christmas tree a “holiday tree” in order to avoid litigation. He hopes the other 49 states will now enact similar laws, even though many commentators agreed that there was no need in the first place, since there was never any law against saying “Merry Christmas.”



Conservative Christians often interpret religious freedom to mean only their freedom to impose their religious beliefs and practices on all other citizens. Some even claim there’s a “war on Christmas” if followers of other religions object to having Christmas celebrations imposed on them in public. Yet I wonder if they’ve thought about what it feels like to be a Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu child when Christian teachers or students promote their beliefs so assertively. It must feel a little like always being on the losing team, at an everlasting pep rally for the winners.