

## Dismantling The Wall

The docket of the United States Supreme Court closed this week with significant damage to what Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson described as the wall between church and state.

### **Government Aid to Religious Schools**

In the Carson vs. Makin case in the state of Maine, the High Court ruled 6-3—along the Court's conservative/liberal fault line—that parents who send their children to religious schools have the right to the same government aid that students attending other private schools are permitted to receive. Previously, the Court has said that giving state funds to religious education violates the clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which prohibits any “establishment of religion”.

According to reports, Maine has an unusual subsidy program because many of its small towns have no public schools. In such cases the students enroll in a private school and the state pays their tuition.

But Justice Sonia Sotomayor, dissenting from the majority, accused the court of dismantling “the wall of separation between church and state that the Framers fought to build”. She went on to say that “in just a few years, the Court has upended constitutional doctrine, shifting from a rule that permits States to decline to fund religious organizations to one that requires States in many circumstances to subsidize religious indoctrination with taxpayer dollars”.

This ruling was similar to the High Court's decision in a case several years ago in Missouri, in which the Court ordered the state to accede to the request of a Lutheran church school seeking public funds to repair its playground. Sotomayor and the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the only justices who dissented in the aforementioned case, declared that “the Court today profoundly changes that relationship [between church and state] by holding, for the first time, that the Constitution requires the government to provide funds directly to a church”.

The question of state aid to religious organizations is a multi-faceted one—in the interest of full disclosure, the present writer acknowledges that had it not been for state and federal scholarships, paying for tuition at the Adventist college from which I graduated would have been vastly more difficult. But when government entities are required by the courts to give money to churches and to organizations sponsored by churches, the concerns expressed by Sotomayor and the late Justice Ginsburg can be seen for the potential problems they pose.

While the various levels of government in the United States have tended in most cases to be extremely reluctant to interfere with the content of religious education, the fact remains that the state has the right to regulate what it chooses to subsidize. Irrespective of whether the state chooses to impose regulations of the sort that would truly interfere with the faith-based practices of a religious school, the use of state funds by any such organization does in fact open the door to such possibilities.

## **Prayer on the Football Field**

As was said decades ago during the debate over prayer as a part of the public school curriculum, as long as there are math tests in school, there will be prayer! The notion of certain ones that God has been “kicked out” of the public schools because the curriculum doesn’t allow overtly religious activities in a setting sponsored by taxpayer dollars—and prayer is most assuredly a religious act directed by one’s peculiar doctrinal beliefs—is really quite foolish. No child can be prevented by law from acting like a Christian on the playground, and the distribution of contraceptives by a public school in no way compels a godly young person to pursue a lifestyle that makes such devices necessary. Many similar examples could be cited.

By the same token, it isn’t possible to prevent athletes or coaches from praying in a public school setting, provided it isn’t done publicly and in a manner that can easily coerce those under a coach’s charge—or the influence of peer pressure—to participate. I must say, however, that one wonders how God’s blessing can be invoked on a game of gratuitous violence!

In *Kennedy vs. Bremerton*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled—by another 6-3 margin—that Coach Joe Kennedy was within his Constitutional rights to pray on the football field after games were held. But the dissenting justices noted evidence that “Kennedy’s prayers at the 50-yard line had a coercive effect on students and allowed him to incorporate his ‘personal religious beliefs into a school event’”. One wonders how conservative Christians would feel if a Muslim or Buddhist coach were to do the same thing in a public school setting.

Justice Sotomayor wrote that athletes “recognize that gaining the coach’s approval may pay dividends small and large, from extra playing time to a stronger letter of recommendation to additional support in college athlete recruiting”. She went on to observe that “some students reported joining Kennedy’s prayer because they felt social pressure to follow their coach and teammates”.

It’s sad that Christians have become better known in our society for showy acts of public piety than for practical, disinterested godliness—like expending time and means helping those in material need, defending social outcasts, the nurturing of happy and selfless relationships, and a whole lot more. What a glorious testimony for the Christian faith would be offered if more who professed the Lord’s name were best known for unselfish deeds and service to others, thus drawing a contrast with those for whom self-focused greed and pleasure-obsession are the driving forces of their lives!

## **The Overturning of *Roe vs. Wade***

But no decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the term just past will compare with the legal earthquake that has followed the 6-3 decision to overturn the landmark 1973 High Court ruling which legalized abortion throughout the United States. While the Court’s decision was anticipated on account of the infamous “leak” from Court documents a few weeks ago, the impact of the actual decision made every bit the dramatic news such a ruling would invariably make.

It is not our purpose in this article to open a discussion as to the morality or lack thereof in the decision to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy. Perhaps a future article will consider

this question in greater depth. What matters for the moment is the abridgement of privacy rights, in large measure due to religious beliefs, which this ruling portends.

Many forget that religious liberty is a right that goes both ways. A most insightful article on this subject observed, in the wake of the Court's decision a week ago: "No faith is monolithic on the abortion issue". One Jewish law professor has noted that "if a pregnant woman is experiencing serious medical complications that can be treated only by terminating her pregnancy, then she has an obligation to expel the contents of her uterus," because under Jewish teachings, "the woman is a person and the zygote/embryo/fetus is not".

Zahra Ayubi, a professor of religion at Dartmouth College, notes that "abortion has generally been permitted up to 120 days in Islam, and restrictive abortion laws, like the near-total ban in Texas, 'take away from Muslim rights to abortion in their tradition and their religion'".

A leading professor at Cornell rightly observes that "despite appearances to the contrary, this court is not especially friendly to Free Exercise claims," only to "conservative Christianity and, accordingly, to Judaism and Islam where the ask is minimal or the traditions happen to be the same". "The sooner we come to understand that the court is all about Christianity rather than some capacious vision of religious liberty for all, the sooner we will begin the process of finding solutions to our modern-day theocracy problem".

## **Conclusion**

But when we turn to the inspired text, we learn that "our modern-day theocracy problem" will grow decidedly more monstrous till God intervenes with the establishment of Jesus' eternal kingdom at His second coming (Rev. 11:15; 19:11-16). The present theocratic crusade by vocal forces within conservative Christianity will ultimate lead to the tyranny foretold in Revelation chapter 13, in which the lamblike beast representing America will create a replica of papal intolerance as practiced in the Middle Ages (Rev. 13:11-17).

Preliminary initiatives in that direction, including those documented in this article, will pave the way for the papacy's triumph over liberty in the United States of America, in which her apostate Protestant accomplices will play a key role. Ellen White, under divine inspiration, quotes the language of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, then describes the great evil this amendment was designed to prevent:

Only in flagrant violation of these safeguards to the nation's liberty, can any religious observance be enforced by civil authority.

Notice how it is the church imposing its will on the state where the ultimate danger lies, not the other way around, as many wrongly fear just now. When indeed such enforcement takes place in our free land, the same author predicts the outcome:

Let the principle once be established in the United States that the church may employ or control the power of the state, that religious observances may be enforced by secular laws; in short, that the authority of church and state is to dominate the conscience, and the triumph of Rome in this country is assured.

That principle is being established in America at the present time, through the decisions lately rendered by the Supreme Court. In the end, state-sponsored religious coercion will lead to the enforcement of a false day of worship, in contrast with the divine memorial of creation enshrined in the Ten Commandments (Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11). And when that happens, the modern prophet declares:

When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of this threefold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near.