



The **religious right** wants to enshrine its theological beliefs in American law, **threatening** the **separation of religion and state** guaranteed by the **First Amendment**. As these efforts meet with increasing success, those who value constitutional protections cannot afford to be silent.



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The religious right has been working for more than 25 years to erode the wall of separation between church and state and bring this nation's government under the control of its narrow, sectarian vision.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, Christian televangelist Pat Robertson, Focus on the Family's James Dobson, and their allies are closer to achieving that goal than ever before. A confluence of political and social changes has led us to a turning point. Developments that take place within the next few months and years may determine if our nation continues to honor our historic legacy of religious liberty for all.

What has brought us to this juncture? A shift in the political landscape. Today, leaders of the religious right have allies in the White House and Congress, and an increasing number of federal judges are sympathetic to their aims. At the same time, inflammatory "culture war" rhetoric about the role of religion in public schools, same-sex marriage, and reproductive choice have divided the American people.

Those of us who believe in an America where people of all faiths — and none — are welcome have our work cut out for us. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the inroads made by soldiers of the religious right is in state-endorsed religion. They seek the government's endorsement of the religious symbols and holy texts that many — but not all — Americans accept. Efforts, for example, are underway to upset the neutrality of the courtroom by allowing the display of Ten Commandments and other religious icons.

As Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black put it in 1962: "When the power, prestige, and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain."

The judiciary is itself a major target of religious right activists, who seek a federal bench stacked with ideologues who would try to undercut church-state separation and roll back reproductive rights, civil liberties, and privacy precedents. Recent changes on the closely divided Supreme Court — particularly the retirement of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who often provided the swing vote on such issues — could provide these activists with an opportunity to enact this agenda.

Ironically, when religious right leaders aren't trying to control the courts, they're attacking them. Consider the claim, made by then-House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX), that "activist courts" are "ridding the public square of any mention of our nation's religious heritage" or the way Family Research Council president Tony Perkins lambasted the high court's justices for

sanctioning what he calls "the right to kill unborn children" and "homosexual sodomy."

Despite its love-hate relationship with the judiciary, the religious right has found an ally in the nation's executive branch. Religion in the United States has traditionally been supported voluntarily by the members of individual denominations. But the current administration has called for a new approach, channeling public funds to churches and other religious groups through various "faith-based initiatives," going so far as to allow them to accept tax dollars, yet discriminate on the basis of religion when hiring. Such developments are simply alarming. This would, for example, override our nation's civil rights laws. And they would make religious groups dependent on the state's largess and bring religion and government into an unhealthy partnership.

Our public schools are also under attack. Here, too, Dobson and his cohorts are seeking a national throwback to the 19th century, when a form of generic Christianity held legal and cultural sway. In short, they want our public schools to celebrate the majority faith, which in most communities is Christianity.

Specifically, religious right organizations are aggressively trying to gain control of curricula in order to determine what all children are taught. Denied the right to teach creationism by the courts, they are now putting forth a type of creationism-lite called "intelligent design." President Bush and some leading lawmakers have endorsed this theory, which claims life is so complex that an intelligent being must be responsible for its creation. While such theologically based theories of human origins may be appropriate to discuss in classes on comparative religion, they do not belong in science classes.

In the high court's 1948 *McCollum v. Board of Education* decision invalidating clergy-led religion classes in public schools, Justice Felix Frankfurter concurred, calling the nation's public schools "a symbol of our secular unity" that "must keep scrupulously free from entanglement in the strife of sects."

While the nation's courts, churches, and classrooms are perhaps the most public stages for the blurring of the line between religion and state, the issue plays out in smaller, more personal settings as well: at the workplace, in the science lab, at the hospital or pharmacy — and when privacy rights arise.

Today, there is no doubt that religious right activists have achieved disproportionate political power. Nevertheless, some 2,000 different denominations and faith groups find a home here. And we can continue to get along, because our Constitution forbids the government to favor any one of those traditions over the others.

Those of us who believe in religious liberty must speak up and take action. Working together we can win the day. ☞