

# Repealing religious liberty

**M**any Americans are probably not aware of it, but Congress is quietly laboring to take away our country's heritage of religious liberty and church-state separation.

Prodded by a combination of extreme religious right groups - prominent among them Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition - the House of Representatives will soon vote on a misnamed "Religious Freedom Amendment" sponsored by an Oklahoma Republican, Ernest Istook, that would eviscerate our First Amendment.

This amendment would dramatically change the way religion and government interact, allowing more state control over affairs that have traditionally been left to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Alarmingly, it has already passed the House Judiciary Committee.

More than 200 years have gone by since the Bill of Rights was ratified. In that time it has never been altered. The First Amendment, which guarantees our right to religious freedom along with other core freedoms, should be treated with special care. Yet Congress is treating it like a first draft.

The so-called "Religious Freedom Amendment" isn't about religious freedom. Rather, it would foster religious tyranny. It would be a step backward for our nation, at one fell swoop dashing the religious diversity and interfaith harmony Americans have worked so hard to maintain.

The Istook amendment would:

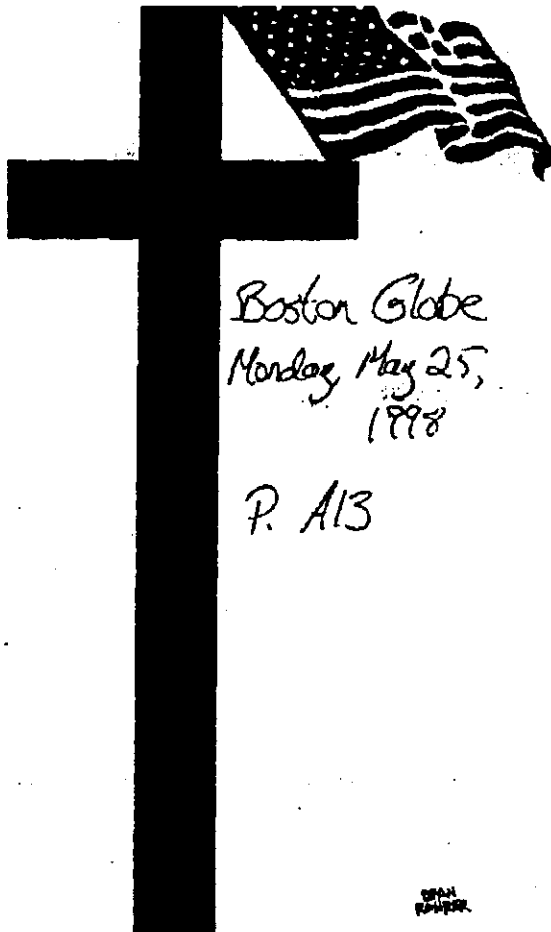
■ Authorize official religious worship in public schools, with no provision made for those students who do not want to take part except, perhaps, banishment to the hallway every morning. This goes beyond "voluntary prayer" in schools, which is legal today, and would encourage "religious mob rule" in public education.

■ Allow, and perhaps require, government to give taxpayer funds to religious groups. All Americans would be forced to pay what are essentially "church taxes" - a noxious concept out of the Middle Ages. Taxpayers would be required to subsidize religious schools and other institutions, whether or not they agree with the faith taught. Every religious group, no matter how unusual or extreme its doctrines, would line up for tax dollars.

■ Encourage government to "recognize... religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions," a concept so vague it could mean almost anything. Utah could declare itself officially Mormon; Oklahoma could authorize a Christian nativity scene in the school auditoriums; Alabama could mandate the posting of Scripture on courtroom walls. In deciding whose symbols or religious messages will be seen or heard, majority religions will prevail.

The so-called "Religious Freedom Amendment" came about both because religious right leaders do not like the separation of church and state and because they seek government funding for their religious activities. Unhappy with the wisdom of our nation's founders, who erected a "wall of separation" for the benefit of both church and state, they have decided to violate the First Amendment's religious freedom provisions.

The Istook amendment is a cynical political rambit.



DEAN ROYER ILLUSTRATION

## House bill is a serious threat to freedom.

Robertson's Christian Coalition has called for a vote on the amendment now, hoping to label members of Congress who vote against it as "anti-God" on the group's slanted voter guides, which will be distributed to many churches the Sunday before the November election. The religious right, aided and abetted by its friends on Capitol Hill, is playing politics with precious American freedoms, using the very religion it claims to cherish as a tool for partisan political warfare.

Fortunately, many concerned Americans will not let the Bill of Rights go through a paper shredder. Dozens of national religious and public policy organizations have formed an umbrella group called the Coalition to

Preserve Religious Liberty. Many religious leaders from Christian, Jewish, and other faith communities play leadership roles in this diverse coalition, reminding Americans that we must not allow religious-political extremists to tamper with our basic freedoms.

As members of the clergy, we recognize that religion has thrived under the First Amendment. The range of religious thought in America is powerfully diverse, and Americans believe in God and attend worship at rates much higher than their counterparts in other Western nations.

Nearly 200 years after Thomas Jefferson spoke of the importance of a "wall of separation between church and state," some in Congress think they have a better idea. They want to blast that wall to rubble and give governmental preference to their personal religious views. The result of their reckless experiment will be religious tyranny, not religious freedom. Americans who value their right to worship must demand that Congress reject the so-called "Religious Freedom Amendment."

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