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**SUNDAY**  
MARCH 4, 2007

## Freedom of religion is not a license to break free of decency

It was a fine prayer. Would that the state House of Representatives actually paid attention to the priorities set out by the Rev. Rick Long, of The Point Community Church in Frankfort,

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when he gave the invocation one day last week. Long said, "Help us to be compassionate to the poor and to the hurting. Help us to be lovers of all life, protectors for the helpless, and peacemakers in the midst of conflict. Help us to be men and women of integrity, honor and purpose. Help us to exercise stewardship and proper management of the resources that you have entrusted us to."

No argument there. He's invoking universal impulses ... aspirations that virtually all of us can embrace, no matter what our attitude toward religion.

I winced a bit when he said, "Lead us to make wise decisions that will protect and pro-

vide for every child, the born and the unborn." But Margie Montgomery and I could just choose to interpret that part of the prayer to suit ourselves.

It's when Long got to the question of who is in charge at the Capitol that I really began to get nervous.

"We confess that we must rely upon You — your sovereignty, your providence and your wisdom," he prayed. "Lord help us to once again look to You for wisdom in every circumstance, for your Word. Forgive us as we have turned from You and rebelled against your ways. I pray that every decision that is considered and made by this body be submitted to You as the sovereign creator."

The Capitol is not God's house. He is not sovereign there. The people are.

God's house is where His people go to worship, not where the people's elected representatives go to make law and run government.

I am not one of those naysayers who believes every vestige of religion must be carefully expunged from public life. I think running to court every

time God's name makes its way into a civic context is a bad idea. But there are limits.

Is it right for Speaker Jody Richards to ask that everybody rise for a sectarian petition that ends, "And it is in the resurrected name of Christ we pray. Amen."?

I can understand the good reverend Long grabbing an opportunity to assert his faith in a risen Jesus. Just a day before, one of those Hollywood types — James Cameron, who directed the morally loose blockbuster "Titanic" — was showing off artifacts that he claimed could have come from the tomb of Jesus, which at one time contained not only his remains but those of Mary Magdalene and maybe their son, Judah.

But asking every state representative to stand up and pray in the name of a resurrected Christ? Even a Jewish member of the House?

This isn't a legal issue. The U.S. Supreme Court decided the question long ago. In a 1983 case called *Marsh v. Chambers*, challenging the use of chaplains by the Nebraska legislature, the majority said it's been done a

long time, so it must be OK. Justices Stevens, Marshall and Brennan dissented.

The majority said, "To invoke divine guidance on a public body entrusted with making laws is not, in these circumstances, an establishment of religion ... it is simply a tolerable acknowledgment of beliefs widely held among the people of this country."

Stevens replied, "Prayers may be said by a Catholic priest in the Massachusetts legislature and by a Presbyterian minister in the Nebraska legislature, but I would not expect to find a Jehovah's Witness or a disciple of Mary Baker Eddy or the Rev. Moon serving as the official chaplain in any state legislature."

What's needed, I think, is some measure of restraint, some reasonable concession to the fact that state government is not a theocracy — a decent respect for those who have been elected to help run government but do not share the basic religious faith that most members of the General Assembly profess.

These are difficult issues.

They are not finally decided. Just one day after Long's prayer, the U.S. Supreme Court took up a case involving the Wisconsin Freedom From Religion Foundation, testing whether that group has legal standing to sue in federal court, alleging that George W. Bush's faith-based initiative is an unconstitutional mixing of church with state.

I've always thought the government should be free to contract for social services from religious groups, as long as they don't force their faith on those they are hired to help. The Wisconsin group objects, because its says its members' tax money is being used to support religion. This will be the first major religious case decided without the swing vote of Sandra Day O'Connor but with the addition of Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito.

Meanwhile, the Kentucky General Assembly will continue to invite religious representatives of various kinds of give invocations. I just hope those who are chosen will use a little common sense and exercise a little forbearance.



Illustration by Paul Lachine

And I hope I'm there the day Speaker Richards grabs the microphone and says, "Members please put down your prayer rug and join me in performing the Salat."

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