

Robertson, ACLU find common ground

Both support free expression

By Joe Taylor
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WILLIAMSBURG
Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson and the American Civil Liberties Union admit they don't sing from the same hymn book on the topic of religion in schools.

But when suppressing freedom of religion amounts to stifling free expression, the rivals who often clash over conflicting interpretations of the First Amendment say they find common ground.

ACLU President Nadine Strossen and Mr. Robertson — founder of the ACLU's conservative rival, the American Center for Law and Justice — will take part in a symposium on that subject Feb. 23 at the College of William and Mary.

"This is an issue in which both of them are intensely interested and both want to affect the way the country addresses its policies," says Peter Owen, director of the symposium that law school students at William and Mary are organizing.

Mr. Robertson and Ms. Strossen won't debate. He will give keynote remarks; she will take part in a panel discussion and speak afterward.

Other members of the panel will include Jay Sekulow, chief attorney for Mr. Robertson's Virginia Beach-based ACLJ, and Elliot Mincberg, legal director of People for the American Way, a Washington-based organization that challenges efforts to push religious activities into the classroom.

"This is a very timely issue," Mr. Owen says. "Basically, it's a time when we are not at all sure how we want to draw the line be-

tween government and religion."

After Republicans swept November's elections and conservatives took charge of Congress, interest was revived in both houses in a constitutional amendment to allow prayer or a "moment of silence" in schools.

In Virginia, the state Board of Education took up the thorny topic of religion in the classroom last month, suggesting preliminary guidelines on such things as permitting student Bible clubs to use school facilities and how much classroom discussion to allow on literature with religious themes.

On March 1, the Supreme Court will hear arguments in a case brought by a Christian student group against the University of Virginia, whose founder, Thomas Jefferson, is considered the father of U.S. religious freedom and the doctrine of separation of church and state.

The students contend the university discriminated against a magazine they publish by denying its request for money from a student activity fund that subsidizes Jewish and Muslim cultural organizations.

The ACLU and People for the American Way have vigorously opposed religious activities in public schools that might be construed as government sponsorship.

Mr. Robertson formed the ACLJ five years ago "as a counter group" to critics of school prayer, says Gene Kapp, a spokesman for Mr. Robertson. "He felt there needed to be some balance brought to this whole arena."

Since its creation, the ACLJ has conducted a high-profile national campaign on behalf of students' religious rights, supporting an annual "Prayer at the Flagpole" gathering on school grounds and sending letters to school officials each spring backing student-led prayers at graduation ceremonies.

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