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Politically Correct Prayer: The Secular Left Goes Berserk

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As expected, the inaugural ceremonies for President George W. Bush opened and closed with prayer. Unexpectedly, the prayers have ignited controversy and unleashed a firestorm of histrionics from the secular left.

Franklin Graham, evangelist son of Billy Graham, and Kirbyjon Caldwell, a leading Houston pastor, had the temerity to pray as Christians—even invoking the name of Jesus Christ. Are you shocked? Is this not what President Bush had in mind when inviting these persons to pray? Is this not what we should expect from two Christian ministers?

Evidently not, so far as the watchdogs of secularism and political correctness are concerned. The leading salvo came from Alan Dershowitz, the vituperative law professor from Harvard. Dershowitz was outraged by the prayers, and accused the Bush administration of subverting the Constitution. There can be no “official sectarian prayer” avowed Dershowitz. “That is what the 1st Amendment is all about, the very first act by the new administration was in defiance of our Constitution.”

Prayer in defiance of the Constitution? Well, rally the militia and unleash the ACLU! Can Dershowitz mean to be taken seriously? It would appear so. Furthermore, he represents a growing antagonism to all genuine religious expression in the public square.

First, let’s set the record straight. The prayers offered by Franklin Graham and Kirbyjon Caldwell did not constitute any state establishment of religion. They prayed as Christians ought always to pray, and their prayers followed in a proud inaugural tradition.

Given the outcry from Dershowitz and company, you might think that Jesus had never been invoked in an inaugural ceremony. This is hardly the case, as prayers in the name of Jesus have been a staple of inaugurations past—including the inaugurations of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton. Billy Graham has been a participant in such ceremonies for decades, and no one is surprised when he prays in Jesus’ name.

The sad fact is that for some time the secular left has been attempting to eradicate all genuine religious expression from public life. According to the legislators of political correctness, it is allowable only to offer “non-sectarian” prayers. Of course, a nonsectarian prayer is not a prayer at all.

Several years ago, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (in keeping with their desire to be nonsectarian, the group is now known only as “The National Conference”) suggested guidelines for praying in public. Such opportunities call for *general* prayers, according to the guidelines, and allow “persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.”

Accordingly, there is no mention of any God in particular. The group suggested alternatives like, “Our Maker” or “Source of Being.” Suggested closing phrases included “Hear our Prayer” or “May Goodness Flourish.” To that we would suggest, “You must be kidding.”

These suggestions are an equal insult to all religions. A Christian ought to pray as a Christian, whether in public or private. The same is true for Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Unitarians, or any others. Prayer to a *general* deity is an offense to faith, and calls for “non-sectarian” prayers betray a misunderstanding of prayer itself.

Professor Dershowitz holds to a rather extreme view of the Constitution, but to a downright bizarre view of prayer. Does he really believe that a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Buddhist can join together in the same prayer? The Buddhist does not even believe in a personal deity.

Dershowitz's fervor on this issue is especially perplexing, given the fact that he identifies as a Jew by tradition, but as an agnostic in belief. What kind of prayer would complement his agnosticism? Perhaps a prayer to the non-existent God.

A Christian minister who prays non-Christian prayers betrays the Gospel. A Jew should be expected to pray as a Jew, and a Muslim as a Muslim. The same is true for all religions and their believers. This is the true promise of the 1st Amendment, and the true fulfillment of religious liberty.

The Constitution guarantees freedom to exercise religion-not to hide behind a mask of generic religiosity. As former senator John Danforth once stated, authentic prayer "is almost by definition sectarian prayer."

This can be a hard pill to swallow. Those offended by hearing the prayers of other religions had better get used to it. Freedom for Christians to pray Christian prayers is also freedom for Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and all others to pray in accordance with their own beliefs. Anything less is sham religion and hollow constitutional promises.

William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, once commented that he tried for a time to pray non-sectarian prayers, but he stopped this experiment when a student told him that he "sounded less like a Christian minister and more like a crew member on the starship *Enterprise*."

The secular left is never bothered by New Age prayers to the "Force" or "Source." They erupt only when a sincere believer of a particular faith prays a particular prayer in his or her particular way-and in public, of all things.

If Alan Dershowitz and his band of secular ideologues have their way, the public square will be swept clean of authentic religious expression. When that happens, we haven't a prayer.

