



REPORT from the Capital

Grim international religious freedom violations reviewed in annual report

A “horrified world” watched violence masquerading as religious devotion erupt over the past year, which is reviewed in the latest report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The independent commission created by Congress in 1998 released its annual report April 30, documenting religious freedom violations, making country-specific recommendations and assessing the U.S. government’s implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act.

Among the 33 countries cited for violations, this year’s USCIRF report provides a grim picture of the state of religious freedom in several geographic areas.

Detailing atrocities committed by ISIL in both Iraq and Syria, the report notes that no religious group has been free from its havoc. “ISIL has unleashed waves of terror upon Yazidis and Christians, Shi’a and Sunnis, as well as others who have dared to oppose its extremist views,” the report states.

The report reviews the Boko Haram attacks on Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, including kidnappings and mass murders at churches and mosques.

It also highlights people forced to flee their homes because of religious persecution, such as Rohingya Muslims and Kachin Christians in Burma.

“By any measure, the horrors of the past year speak volumes about how and why religious freedom and the protection of the rights of vulnerable religious communities matter,” according to the report.

USCIRF affirms the State Department’s list of nine “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPCs), and it recommends a continued designation of Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as such.

The commission also recommends adding eight other countries to the CPC list: Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Paki-

The U.S. State Department’s ‘Countries of Particular Concern’

Burma	Iran	Sudan
China	North Korea	Turkmenistan
Eritrea	Saudi Arabia	Uzbekistan

USCIRF recommends adding

Central African Republic	Pakistan
Egypt	Syria
Iraq	Tajikistan
Nigeria	Vietnam

stan, Syria, Tajikistan and Vietnam.

This is the first time the commission recommended adding the Central African Republic. After a 2013 coup resulted in lawlessness, the country has experienced ethnic cleansing, religious targeting and sectarian violence that merits the designation.

USCIRF’s report recognizes that non-state actors are often some of the most egregious violators of religious freedom, such as in the Central African Republic and areas of Iraq and Syria. The commission concluded that the CPC classification should be expanded to allow for designations in those areas, even though a government does not exist or does not control its territory.

The commission noted that ten other countries have serious violations, but do not meet the CPC standard. It recommended these be labeled as “Tier 2” countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Russia and Turkey.

The report recommends that the United States and like-minded nations engage in emergency action to combat the humanitarian crises created by these violations. It commended the U.S. government for helping save numerous Yazidis from the hands of ISIL and providing humanitarian aid.

The report notes, however, that help is not enough. The only permanent solution to guarantee the safety and survival of the persecuted is “the full recognition of religious freedom as a sacred human right” by every individual and nation.

—Cherilyn Crowe

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Supreme Court hears arguments over constitutional right to same-sex marriage

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court took up the question of a constitutional right to same-sex marriage on April 28.

Justice Anthony Kennedy — the swing vote and the author of the Court's major gay rights decisions for the past 20 years — struggled to understand how the Court in 2015 could alter the definition of marriage.

"This definition has been with us for millennia," he said. "And it — it's very difficult for the Court to say, 'Oh, well, we — we know better.'"

Justices pressed lawyers for gay and lesbian couples in Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and Michigan — cases combined to be known as *Obergefell v. Hodges* — about the nature of the institution they were fighting so hard to access. One important question boiled down to this: Is marriage about a civil contract between two adults, or a societal covenant for the rearing of children?

Michigan's Special Assistant Attorney General John Bursch, arguing to keep his state's ban on gay marriage intact, repeatedly stressed that marriage is about securing bonds between parents and their biological (or adopted) children.

"There's harm if you change the definition [of marriage] because, in people's minds, if marriage and creating children don't have anything to do with each other, then what do you expect? You expect more children outside of marriage," he said.

Justice Elena Kagan said she found his warnings unrealistic.

"Do you think that that's what it would do, Mr. Bursch, that if one allowed same-sex marriage, one would be announcing to the world that marriage and children have nothing to do with each other?" she asked.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg played down the link between procreation and marriage, noting that elderly couples, infertile couples and even some prisoners could get state blessing on their marriages.

Ginsburg also noted that society's understanding of marriage itself has evolved, now shunning the notion of "a dominant male [married] to a subordinate female."

Justices Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito wondered early and often what would prevent an even further redefinition of marriage to include multiple spouses, or even child brides. "Would there be any ground for denying them a license?" Alito wanted to know.

Proponents of same-sex marriage argued that if the Court really cares about the well-being of children, it must not overlook the estimated 210,000 children being raised by same-sex parents without "the stabilizing structure and the many benefits of marriage."

Arguments about children and parentage, they said, are important, but also a sideshow to more fundamen-



On April 28, groups in support and in opposition of same-sex marriage gathered outside of the U.S. Supreme Court.

tal questions about human dignity and civil rights.

"The right to be married is as basic a liberty, as basic a fundamental liberty ... which has existed for all of human civilization," Justice Stephen Breyer said, expressing dismay at the idea that the government would offer "that to almost everyone, but exclude[] a group."

Kennedy wrestled with the idea of withholding the "dignity"-bestowing access to marriage, echoing his earlier decisions that same-sex couples want nothing more than the "same ennoblement" as everyone else.

Bursch emphasized that his view of marriage was about protecting children, not enhancing or harming any adult's dignity.

"Dignity may have grown up around marriage as a cultural thing," he said, "but the state has no interest in bestowing or taking away dignity from anyone, and certainly it's not the state's intent to take dignity away from same-sex couples, or from anyone based on their sexual orientation."

Arguing on behalf of the Obama administration, Solicitor General Donald Verrilli framed the case — and the very nature of marriage — in the broadest possible terms.

"[W]hat I would suggest is that in a world in which gay and lesbian couples live openly as our neighbors, they raise their children side by side with the rest of us, they contribute fully as members of the community, that it is simply untenable — untenable to suggest that they can be denied the right of equal participation in an institution of marriage, or that they can be required to wait until the majority decides that it is ready to treat gay and lesbian people as equals," he said.

"Gay and lesbian people are equal," said Verrilli. "They deserve the equal protection of the laws, and they deserve it now."

The Court is expected to issue its decision by the end of June.

—Religion News Service and BJC Staff Reports

REFLECTIONS

Exploring the church-state side of the same-sex marriage cases

When the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the same-sex marriage cases, the justices did not invite briefs on religious liberty. In its writ of certiorari granting review, the Court framed the issues to be whether same-sex marriage is constitutionally required under the Fourteenth Amendment and, if not, whether states under Article IV have to recognize same-sex marriages performed in states where it is legal. It did not frame any First Amendment issues.

But, clearly, church-state relations pervade this subject, and several justices turned to the topic in their questions to counsel and in their debate with each other on the bench.

Three such areas of inquiry about religious liberty are noteworthy:

First, Justice Antonin Scalia asked the petitioners' attorney, Mary Bonauto, whether ministers and the churches they serve would have to perform and host same-sex weddings if they disagreed with that understanding of marriage. The answer from the attorneys, including Bonauto, and Justice Elena Kagan who chimed in, was an unequivocal "no."

The day before the arguments, the BJC's Holly Hollman wrote that she was "unaware of any credible public voice seeking marriage equality who is trying to force objecting clergy or houses of worship to perform or host a same-sex marriage ceremony." I completely agree. Justice Scalia must not have gotten the memo. Actually, Justice Scalia knows better; I think, as he often does, he was playing devil's advocate (no pun intended). Under the First Amendment's church autonomy doctrine, these decisions on the part of ministers and houses of worship are beyond the ken of government to second-guess or regulate.

Second, Chief Justice John Roberts inquired of Solicitor General Donald Verrilli whether, for example, religiously affiliated schools would have to provide housing for same-sex couples.

Verrilli responded that the balance between accommodating religious rights and ensuring civil rights — beyond the local church context — is something that will have to be worked out, probably at the state level. In my view, this would be the case with respect to most non-profit religious affiliates — such as colleges, retreat centers, adoption agencies and the like — and also for-profit wedding vendors providing goods and services who argue they are being required,

in some fashion, to participate in the objectionable wedding ceremony.

Third, Justice Samuel Alito asked Verrilli whether a religiously affiliated college or university that objects to same-sex marriages could have its tax exemption threatened under a case called *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983). In that case, the Supreme Court upheld the government's revocation of Bob Jones University's tax exemption because it banned interracial dating on campus and condemned interracial marriages. The Supreme Court reasoned that "[g]overnment has a fundamental, overriding interest in eradicating racial discrimination in education — discrimination that prevailed, with official approval, for the first 165 years of this Nation's constitutional history." (Full disclosure: the BJC filed an *amicus* brief that, while disclaiming any agreement with Bob Jones' racist policies, supported Bob Jones in its opposition to the government's withdrawal of a generally available benefit like tax exemption because the government disagrees with the taxpayer's religious beliefs and practices.)

Verrilli acknowledged this would be an issue that will have to be dealt with. The solicitor general is right. But one thing is for certain: the *Bob Jones* decision should not threaten the tax-exempt status of houses of worship and other pervasively sectarian organizations. The Supreme Court was meticulously careful in *Bob Jones* to limit its decision to "religious schools — not ... churches or other purely religious institutions; here the governmental interest is in denying public support to racial discrimination in education."

The extent to which *Bob Jones* might apply to sexual orientation instead of race and to other religious affiliates besides education institutions is an issue yet to be resolved. But the tax-exempt status of churches should not be in jeopardy.

The takeaway from the religious liberty discussion before the Court is that many issues remain open and undecided, at least until after the Court rules on the underlying issue of same-sex marriage. Of course, the Court may give guidance on the religious liberty issues in the opinion when it comes down. One thing that is settled is the inviolability of the worship sanctuary and fundamental beliefs and practices in the life of the church. The BJC is poised to continue fighting for that protection.



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

"One thing that is settled is the inviolability of the worship sanctuary and fundamental beliefs and practices in the life of the church."

Respectful discourse, religious liberty & equality

Opposing sides in battles surrounding religious liberty have more in common than they realize, creating potential for meaningful conversation, according to Alan Brownstein, professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis, School of Law. Focusing on the complex nature of church-state disputes and religion and equality issues, he delivered three presentations for the 2015 Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State, held April 7-8 on the two campuses of Mercer University in Atlanta and Macon, Georgia.

The annual event brings a church-state expert to a college, university or seminary to examine religious liberty and educate students. Brownstein, a nationally-recognized constitutional law scholar, used his platform to provide practical ways to elevate the current debate, examine the complexity of church-state issues and discuss recent Supreme Court decisions with religious liberty implications.

"America is a place where our differences enrich us rather than divide and diminish us," Brownstein proclaimed during his first presentation, held at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta. Focusing on engaging in respectful discourse on religion and equality, he illuminated the power of speech.

Brownstein laid out two paradigms for the use of speech in dialogue with others. He said it can be a "weapon in a power struggle" between us and others who are different – people we might consider "strangers." In that model, there is no need to talk to the strangers; we only need to talk amongst ourselves about them, he said.

Or, speech can be a tool to build bridges

between people who are different from each other and settle disputes. But, in order to do that, we must talk to the "strangers" and assist them in appreciating our needs and concerns.

"Part of respectful discourse is talking in a way that allows you to understand the other person. And part of respectful discourse is figuring out the best way to talk so that the other person can understand you," Brownstein explained.

An important step to respectful discourse in a free society is "to recognize that the essence of liberty is the right to be different, to act wrongly in the eyes of others," he continued. In order for rights to be meaningful, you have to protect them, even if someone is acting

"wrong" in your eyes – be that expressing a wrong message or worshiping the wrong god. While one side does not have to accommodate the other side's demands, Brownstein told the crowd they must acknowledge the cost and pain a compromise may require of the other side.

Brownstein showed how easy it is to find common ground between religious and non-religious people by explaining both have two of the same fears: worrying that they (and their voices) will be excluded from public discourse shaping policy, and that the other side is trying to change who they are, culturally and legally.

Brownstein also said that, while respectful discourse on religious liberty and same-sex marriage is extremely rare today, those on different sides have more common ground than they might think. He noted that both religious liberty rights and the right to same-sex marriage are based on the idea of personal autonomy and reflect a commitment to relational responsibilities. Plus, both are challenged on the grounds

that they create a slippery slope.

"Too often, we ignore the complex beliefs of both liberals and conservatives, and pigeonhole both groups into ill-fitting ideological straitjackets," he said.

Brownstein told the audience that "people who really understand and believe in the separation of church and state can be extremely effective bridge-builders in today's polarized society" as they affirm both religious freedom and the prevention of government establishment of religion.

Continuing his call to understanding, Brownstein focused on the complexity of all church-state issues the next day in Macon, Georgia, when he gave his second presentation on Mercer University's main campus. "[S]ome church-state issues grounded in religious differences are genuinely difficult problems for even the most well-intentioned society to resolve," Brownstein stated.



Brownstein



Brownstein delivers the final Shurden Lecture at Mercer University.

Part of the complexity of church-state disputes, according to Brownstein, is that they may involve four fundamental values that receive constitutional protection on their own: personal liberty and autonomy; equality of treatment and status; freedom of speech; and the diffusion of power.

To find solutions to the hard cases,

Mercer University Photo



From left: Buddy and Kay Shurden attend the third lecture; BJC Executive Director Brent Walker joins Brownstein and McAfee School of Theology Professor David Gushee for a "lunch and learn" panel for students on current religious liberty issues; Brownstein, Walker and McAfee Dean Alan Culpepper tour the American Baptist Historical Society archives on Mercer University's Atlanta campus.

highlight 2015 Shurden Lectures

Brownstein noted that disputes can often be mitigated through an inclusive process of decision-making.

A commitment to religious liberty and religious equality requires a commitment to living in a religiously integrated society, according to Brownstein. It's by interacting with each other that we form bonds of empathy and mutual respect, dispelling stereotypes.

Brownstein's legal expertise led to an engaging discussion with students at Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law for his third presentation, as he broke down the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* and *Town of Greece v. Galloway*.

Brownstein said he believed the Court reached the right conclusion in *Hobby Lobby*, allowing a closely held for-profit corporation access to a religious accommodation provided to objecting religious



Mercer's Walter F. George School of Law in Macon.

groups. However, he pointed out "serious mistakes" the Court made reaching that conclusion, which undermine the persuasiveness of the opinion and helped provoke the political backlash against both the decision and religious liberty accommodations in general.

While agreeing with the Court's conclusion to allow owners to operate a business consistent with their religious beliefs, Brownstein said it was a "mistake" for the Court to assert that a for-profit corporation itself is a person with a right to exercise religion protected by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). He sees religious liberty as a dignitary right, but found it an "offensive caricature of humanity" to describe corporations that way, explaining that they do not love, experience guilt or shame, or stand in judgment before God.

Other details of the decision were cause for alarm, according to Brownstein, such as the Court's failure to write a narrow opinion in the case. "That failure, I believe, has contributed to the heated criticism the opinion has received, and it has contributed to increased opposition to religious liberty exemptions in general," he said.

But, when it came to the decision in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, which upheld government-sponsored prayer in local government meetings, Brownstein did not mince words, telling the crowd, "I can't think of anything positive to say about it."

Brownstein reviewed the unique nature of local government meetings, drawing a sharp contrast between their operation and the operation of a state legislature (which was at the center of the 1983 case that upheld legislative prayer). Brownstein emphasized that the coercive nature of prayer in front of local government bodies is markedly different.

After breaking down the Court's shortcomings in interpreting social reality, Brownstein also found fault with the town's methods in finding the person to lead the prayer.

"To put it bluntly, the town's invitation process treated non-Christian and non-affiliated residents as if they didn't exist or were unworthy of notice," Brownstein said.

"The majority opinion in *Town of Greece* is a terrible decision for anyone who cares about religious liberty and religious equality. We can only hope that it's given a narrow interpretation in future cases," he concluded.

The Shurden Lectures also brought other activities to the Mercer University campuses, such as a lunch for McAfee students featuring a discussion of religious liberty with Brownstein and BJC Executive Director Brent Walker, moderated by McAfee Professor David Gushee. Also, BJC staff members met with law students, and Walker and Brownstein joined McAfee Dean Alan Culpepper to visit the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society, where they viewed original manuscripts from colonial Baptist Isaac Backus and other artifacts.

The 2016 Shurden Lectures will be held on the campus of Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. For information on previous and future lectures, including links to videos of full presentations, visit our website at BJConline.org/lectures.

—Cherilyn Crowe

Students respond to the lectures

"What made Brownstein's talk so wonderfully engaging was just how darn relevant it was. He talked about two conversations that the religious community is having right now; not a couple of years ago, right now."

—Peter Wischusen

"Brownstein's lecture was incredibly important and helpful for me as both a minister and a writer. The words we say matter, and it was refreshing to hear someone offer practical tips for dialoguing in a way that respects the personhood and dignity of those that do not agree with us."

—Rachel Freeny

"Brownstein's lecture prompted me to think about my own context and how I can be a positive voice in discussions regarding matters of religious liberty. ... I hope to be an advocate for respectful dialogue and that I will not hesitate to correct those that I see trivializing the views and needs of others, even when I agree with their opinions."

—Lindsey Huggins

Watch and listen to the lectures online



You can watch all three of this year's Shurden Lectures, as well as lectures from previous years, on our Vimeo page at Vimeo.com/BJCvideos. To listen to the lectures in podcast form, subscribe to our iTunes channel or stream them on our website at BJConline.org/podcasts.

The Bible shouldn't be a state's symbol

By Jennifer Hawks, BJC Staff Counsel



In my office, I proudly display my Tennessee roots. I grew up discussing Tennessee politics with my grandfather, a former state representative. While I was in law school, he gave me several items from his 1970s legislative office, including a framed state flag and a state seal magnifying glass. I have carried these items to Mississippi, Texas, and now D.C. I love my home state and am proud to call myself a Tennessean, but every once in a while, I just have to shake my head and wonder.

The recent effort to make the "Holy Bible" the official state book of Tennessee was a bad idea from the start. Previously, Louisiana (2014) and Mississippi (2015) had introduced similar bills, although neither bill made it to the legislative floor for a vote. Tennessee's actually passed its House of Representatives! I am encouraged, however, that the Tennessee Senate heeded the advice of the state's attorney general and is allowing the measure to die in committee. Hopefully this is the last we will hear of this type of legislation.

State Rep. Jerry Sexton introduced his bill with good, albeit misguided, intentions. The Bible is probably in more private homes than any other single book. In my personal library, I have numerous copies of the Bible, including versions in English, Hebrew and Greek. I even went to seminary to study it more in depth. According to *Guinness World Records*, the Bible is the best-selling book of non-fiction with more than 5 billion copies in print worldwide. Additionally, more than 2,100 languages have a translation for at least one of the Bible's 66 books. Although the Bible's reach is undeniable, it is not an appropriate candidate to become an official symbol of the state of Tennessee, or any other state.

All states have multiple symbols highlighting their various characteristics such as history, flora, fauna, creativity and industry. Some symbols, like flags, seals, mottos, wildflowers and songs, may be well-known by the citizenry. Others, such as the state beverage, folk song, game bird, pet or insect, are likely known only to a few.

While Michigan and Massachusetts each include a "children's book" as a state symbol, no state includes "book" as an official state symbol. Alabama has had a "state Bible" since 1853, which has been used in each subsequent inauguration to swear-in

the governor and is displayed at the Alabama Department of Archives and History when not in use.

With the pervasive influence of the Bible and a process for giving official recognition to aspects of state culture, why has the Bible never been recognized by any state as its official book? The two-front opposition in Tennessee encapsulates the best reasons for other states to avoid similar proposals: designating the "Holy Bible" as the state book is both unconstitutional and trivializing.

As several critics proclaimed, the bill is unconstitutional. The U.S. Constitution prohibits laws "respecting an establishment of religion" while Tennessee's constitution goes further, declaring "that no preference ever be given, by law, to any religious establishment or mode of worship."

“Although the Bible’s reach is undeniable, it is not an appropriate candidate to become an official symbol of the state of Tennessee, or any other state.”

Tennessee Attorney General Herbert Slatery summarized the analysis as: "Legislative designation of The Holy Bible as the official book — as an official symbol — of the State of Tennessee, when viewed objectively, must presumptively be understood as an endorsement of religion and of a particular religion."

The Bible is inextricably tied to the Christian faith. While debates on inerrancy and inspiration frequently occur within Christian circles, all Christian groups ascribe some measure of authority to its text. Often, the Bible plays a central role in corporate worship and personal devotion. Giving official state recognition to the importance of the Bible within Tennessee history and culture is a back-door endorsement of Christianity as the state's official religion.

Like Rep. Sexton, many of the bill's detractors are devout Christians. They oppose the bill because they view equating the Bible's importance to that of the state agricultural insect, amphibian and tartan as trivializing. Precisely because the Bible means so much to them personally, they could not fathom reducing it to just one more item in a list of secular mundane symbols.

The Bible does not need official recognition from the state of Tennessee or any other state to demonstrate its importance. Through our words and actions, particularly love for our neighbors, the Christian community is — or at least should be — a far truer testimony to the Bible's influence than including it on a list as one among many state symbols.

The Hollman Report will return in next month's Report from the Capital. Visit our website for a recent online column from General Counsel Holly Hollman, released on April 28.

New York City to change rules to allow churches to rent schools

NEW YORK — Congregations in New York City that rent space in public schools are still able to do so, despite the U.S. Supreme Court's March 30 rejection of an appeal from a Bronx church that sought to overturn a ban on after-hours worship services at public schools.

A spokesman for Mayor Bill de Blasio also said that the mayor would work to ensure that houses of worship could continue to rent space like any other group.

"Now that litigation has concluded, the city will develop rules of the road that respect the rights of both religious groups and nonparticipants," Wiley Norvell said in response to the ruling. "While we review and revise the rules, groups currently permitted to use schools for worship will continue to be able to worship on school premises."

Pastor Robert Hall of the Bronx Household of Faith, which was the plaintiff in the case, said he was cautiously optimistic after the administration's response.

"We are gratified that he is allowing the churches to stay," Hall told *The New York Times*. "It remains to be seen what the long-term policy is going to be, however."

The Court's decision not to hear the case, issued without comment, was the third time that the High Court rejected an appeal by the evangelical church, which for years held Sunday services at a local public school. The church last year finished work on its own building near P.S. 15, but said it still needs extra space for events that include religious services.

The city's Board of Education said it wanted to maintain a policy against allowing houses of worship from renting space in city-owned buildings to prevent a blurring of church-state lines.

The mayor supports that policy in principle, but in a marked change from his predecessor, Michael Bloomberg, de Blasio has also said he wants to allow congregations the same access as any other group.

"I stand by my belief that a faith organization playing by the same rules as any community non-profit deserves access," de Blasio said a year ago after a federal appeals court upheld the city's ban, which the Supreme Court essentially affirmed with its decision not to hear the case.

"You know, they have to go through the same application process, wait their turn for space, pay the same rent — but I think they deserve access," de Blasio said.

Earlier this year, as part of the mayor's push to provide universal pre-K for the city's children, the de Blasio administration announced that starting in September, pre-K classes will be permitted to break in the middle of the day for "non-program" activities such as prayer or religious instruction.

The policy has pleased faith-based schools, most of which operate under Jewish or Catholic auspices and many of which receive city funding for pre-K classes. But it has alarmed some civil liberties advocates.

Supporters of the Bronx Household of Faith and some 60 other groups that had been allowed to worship in public buildings pushed de Blasio to take action in the wake of the Supreme Court decision.

—David Gibson, Religion News Service with BJC Staff Reports

Debate continues over distribution of Bibles in Okla. schools

After a series of challenges to the distribution of Gideon Bibles in the state's school districts, Oklahoma's attorney general stepped in to defend the practice.

On April 14, Attorney General Scott Pruitt sent a letter to superintendents. "Under the United States Constitution, school districts can permit private citizens to distribute to students religious literature, including bibles," he wrote. "To allow private citizens to do so, the school should simply enact a neutral policy that allows equal access for all Oklahomans to engage their free exercise rights."

Pruitt's initiative comes in response to a letter that the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent to 26 Oklahoma school districts warning them that they may be violating the First Amendment of the Constitution by allowing the distribution of Bibles during the school day.

Pruitt may have inadvertently opened the public school doors to atheists, Satanists and others wishing to distribute literature to students.

Oklahoma's Bible tussle began after a third-grade teacher in Duncan distributed Gideon Bibles to her students. In response, the Church of Ahriman, a Satanist church in Oklahoma City, has asked permission to distribute Satanist literature at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School.

When the American Humanist Association threatened to sue, the Duncan school district responded by forbidding teachers or administrators from distributing religious material to their students.

Meanwhile, Andrew Seidel, legal counsel for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, wrote to Pruitt in response: "If the goal of the Oklahoma Attorney General's office is to allow public schools to be used to distribute atheist messages, then this is a brilliant idea."

—Religion News Service with BJC Staff Reports

RFRA updates available online

States across the country continue to make headlines for proposed and debated versions of religious freedom legislation. Stay updated on the latest developments as they happen with the BJC's state RFRA tracker, available on our website at BJCOnline.org/state-RFRA-tracker-2015.

Some of the biggest news since the last edition of *Report from the Capital* came from Indiana and Arkansas. BJC Executive Director Brent Walker released a statement on April 1, explaining the importance of protecting religious liberty and non-discrimination, which is available on our website.

Editor's note: After a *Report from the Capital* reader pointed out a confusing line in the transcript of Ambassador David Saperstein's remarks featured in our April magazine, the U.S. Department of State updated the online transcript to make it clear that, as part of his first priority, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom will "seek strongly an end to blasphemy and apostasy laws."



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REPORT

from the Capital

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New RLC Luncheon discount available for young ministers

Tickets are on sale for the 2015 Religious Liberty Council Luncheon, to be held Friday, June 19, in Dallas, Texas, in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly. The event is open to the public, but you must have a ticket to attend.

Tickets are \$40 each. **If you are a minister with five years or less experience, you have the opportunity to purchase a ticket for the luncheon at a discounted price of \$20.** Generous donors have made this discount possible so more young

ministers can attend the luncheon.

This is a unique event to connect with the BJC and other supporters of religious liberty. The keynote speaker will be the Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle, president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School and the author of *Pulpit & Politics: Separation of Church & State in the Black Church*.

Visit BJCOnline.org/luncheon to purchase tickets and learn more details. If you have questions, contact Development Director Taryn Deaton at tdeaton@BJCOnline.org.



As a young minister, I am cognizant of my limited knowledge and language to correctly explain and support religious liberty in my con-

text. Thus, attending the luncheon will allow an opportunity to gain knowledge of current religious liberty ideals and movements from the collective wisdom associated with the BJC.

The discounted price greatly influenced my decision as it made purchasing the ticket more feasible

on a new minister's budget than the original price. Although I would like to contribute more in the future, I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Luncheon as a young minister today.

I would say to young ministers who are unfamiliar with the BJC: this is an accessible introduction to learn about the goals and ideals of the BJC in protecting religious liberty for all. For young ministers who are familiar with the BJC: this is a prime opportunity to demonstrate support for the BJC's mission.

—Jenny Hodge