

Supreme Court review of Ten Commandments cases an opportunity for education on religious liberty

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January 2005

When the Supreme Court hears arguments in two Ten Commandments cases this March, many of you will have the opportunity to discuss the issue with friends, family and co-workers.

Disputes over such displays make headlines and have dominated recent conversations about the role of religion in public life. The media will likely present the usual caricature of a conflict between secular forces intent on banning religion and religious forces eager to use any means available to promote their beliefs. The debate will be more interesting and productive if supporters of religious liberty for all get involved and reframe the issue.

We should take every opportunity to respond to the mischaracterizations and oversimplifications that will surely fill the airwaves. Those who rally around monuments in the name of protecting religion should be met with equally passionate voices from those who believe religion is best protected when the government does not try to do the work of the church. Here are a few suggestions on how to move beyond the usual red herrings.

First, when proponents of government-supported Ten Commandments displays argue that the Commandments are good rules for living, please tell them you agree. Certainly most, if not all, of the Commandments enjoy broad popular support. The idea that religious teachings offer benefits to society is not controversial. Allowing the government to choose which teachings it endorses is.

The debate has never been about the

teachings, but about the proper teacher and manner of teaching religious values. Just because something offers a benefit does not mean the government can or should promote it. I find my Sunday school class extremely helpful, but I would never expect the government to support it. The government can endorse many things, but thanks to the First Amendment, it cannot favor your religion, nor denigrate mine.

Second, many people will argue in favor of Ten Commandments displays because they want to fight what they feel is a growing secularism in our culture and the declining influence of religion. Again, many Christians will share the concern. But, fighting secularism through government promotion of religion seems a particularly weak strategy.

Religion will not gain center stage in our society by relying on the government; communities of faith must work hard and demonstrate the appeal of their faith. A pastor in Texas recently told me that his congregation was quick to find fault with the removal of the Ten Commandments until he challenged them on their own efforts to know and live according to the Commandments. It takes little creativity to find ways to promote religious values better than defending an unconstitutional display of Scripture.

Forbidding the government from making religious decisions, favoring a particular religion, or promoting religion in general does not promote secularism. To the contrary, it provides an environment where religion can have great influence.

Third, many contend that the Ten Commandments are the basis of our law. While religion has had a profound influence on the development of our country, this argument promotes a false history and a limited view of the Scriptures. There is no evidence that the Ten Commandments played a significant role in the development of American law. Certainly there is no evidence that the Constitution, which only mentions religion in the First Amendment and the prohibition on religious tests for office, derives from a religious text. A quick review of the Commandments reveals that half (depending on how you count them) of the Commandments deal with our duties to God for which we have no secular legal counterpart.

It is incorrect and disrespectful to reduce the Ten Commandments to a secular, historical document. They hold a unique place in the history of particular religious faiths. Those faiths, and not the government, should define their place in our society.

You cannot emphasize the sacred nature of the Ten Commandments and not conflict with the Constitution's protection against government supported religion. Similarly, you cannot stress the secular aspects of the Decalogue, without shortchanging their religious significance.

The BJC is urging the Court to clarify the law in a way that recognizes the fundamental religious value of the Ten Commandments and upholds our country's fundamental commitment to religious liberty. We hope you will help others understand.