

Supreme Court prayer ruling may spur new alliances

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STANFORD, California (RNS) This week's Supreme Court ruling allowing sectarian prayers at public meetings dealt a body blow to atheist organizations.

That was the assessment of David Silverman, president of American Atheists, speaking Tuesday (May 6) to a group of nonbelievers at Stanford University. He then described a scenario that may raise eyebrows among some atheists: working with religious groups to fight against the ruling.

"That's what we have to do, not only organize the atheists, but the Satanists, the Scientologists," he said. In a conversation before his talk, he added Muslims, Jews, and Hindus. "We as atheists have the responsibility to urge them and push them and get them in there to get their prayers" said at public meetings.

That's a change for a man who has famously described religion as a "poison." And it is emblematic, observers say, of the change that may result from the majority opinion in *Greece v. Galloway*, which found that prayers citing "the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross" are permissible before government business.

Other secularists are likewise convinced that now is the time for atheists to join forces with members of minority faiths.

"Not only does this rally the full spectrum of nontheists, it angers many Americans who are part of a minority religion and also many Christians who believe firmly in the separation of religion and government," said Edwina Rogers, executive director of Secular Coalition for America, an umbrella group that lobbies on behalf of more than a dozen nontheist groups, including American Atheists.

Jacques Berlinerblau, a Georgetown University professor and author of *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, said the court ruling is "both

a setback and an opportunity.”

“The logic of the majority (decision) is absurd,” he said. “And in this sense, it might galvanize political actors who haven’t cooperated much in recent years to rediscover their common concerns and goals.”

Already, some nontheist groups are mobilizing. The American Humanist Association, whose legal department filed a brief in support of the plaintiffs, an atheist and a Jew, has announced it is organizing and assisting nonbelievers who wish to deliver humanist invocations at government meetings. Meanwhile, the Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced an award for the best nonreligious prayer.

Ron Lindsay, president of the Center for Inquiry, a humanist advocacy organization, said CFI is “studying its options,” among them outreach to religious groups, which it has done before, he said.

But, he cautions, there may be hurdles.

“There may still be reluctance among some religious bodies to cooperate openly with atheists, agnostics and humanists, especially when it comes to lobbying public officials,” Lindsay said. “It’s a question of whether respect for fundamental rights and a shared concern over government’s implicit endorsement of Christianity can trump theological misgivings.”

Fred Edwards, national director of the United Coalition of Reason, an organization that fosters cooperation among different secular groups, added: “I think we are about as united as we’re going to get.”

There are good reasons why atheists and religious minorities may not come together, said Anthony Pinn, a Rice University professor and author of a memoir about his move from Christianity to atheism.

“Nontheists want all theistic ritual practices removed from public discourse, and (religious) groups are more likely to want their perspective represented in the ‘approved’ theistic ritual practices” permitted by the decision, he said.

But Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the Freedom Forum’s First Amendment Center, said previous Supreme Court decisions have rallied unlikely coalitions that successfully fought to overturn or change unpopular rulings: the Dred Scott decision united anti-slavery advocates of both races; *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which upheld a law

against homosexual sex, resulted in straight and gay alliances.

Still, Haynes said, "I may be wrong, but I don't see this decision in that league." Instead, he is looking for other strategies, such as further challenges to the legality of sectarian prayer from secular groups.

David Niose, legal director of the American Humanist Association's Appignani Humanist Legal Center, said the decision will likely strengthen bonds between secular groups, from the most militant to the most liberal. And that large umbrella may attract some religious groups.

"If we start seeing excessive prayers to Jesus in public forums, all kinds of non-Christians—not just atheists and humanists—will no doubt find common ground in their opposition to it," he said.