

First Amendment Rights: Are We Protecting or Destroying Them?

Contributed by Nicole Keelan

As of lately, a lot of religious controversies have been heating up the tabloids. Whether it is the ACLU battling the Hurricane Katrina Memorial or saying The Pledge of Allegiance in schools, the fight of separation of church and state has been taking the front pages of local and national newspapers.

The ACLU, otherwise known as American Civil Liberties Union, objective is to defend Americans rights, freedoms, and liberties; however, recently the ACLU seems to be setting poor examples by limiting the Amendment they "fight" so hard for. Hurricane Katrina victims have had enough on their plate this past year, but that sure has not stopped the ACLU from intervening. Currently the ACLU would like a cross memorial in honor of 130 people that died during the hurricane be taken down and moved to the donating parish's private property.

This cross is being placed near the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, where the water from the hurricane flooded 130+ homes. One may be asking themselves, "what exactly the problem with a cross memorial is?" Well, the ACLU feels that this memorial is in violation of the "Establishment Clause" of the First Amendment, which states, "Congress should make no law respecting an establishment of religion." St. Bernard Parish Councilman, Mark Mondary, believes "the ACLU is trying to create a controversy to generate publicity, rather than protecting Americans first Amendment Rights." Its not even an issue of controversy, it is an incorrect interpretation of the First Amendment. The Amendment does not only state that there should be a separation of church vs. state but also allows Americans to believe and practice whatever religion or anti-religion they want to. A memorial for people that died in a tragedy is not a "distraction" as the ACLU likes to call it. The "distraction" is the ACLU taking Americans "rights" to a whole new level. Americans drive by churches, memorials, graveyards, and other "religious" landmarks everyday without a cringe, and a memorial for such an American travesty should be taken the same way by fellow Americans if not with more empathy. The problem with the ACLU is not that its intentions are to protect the rights and freedoms of Americans, but now the ACLU and other organizations are setting a poor example of a county that many people around the world would love to be able to enjoy. America, American morals and values, The American Constitution, The Pledge of Allegiance, and many other American foundations were built under the concept of religion and/or the idea of "under God", and that's what makes this country America. The problems only continue into the educational intuitions Americans rely on to teach themselves and their families. A lawsuit was recently filed by a valedictorian, Brittany McComb because she was literally stopped by her school during her graduation speech. McComb spoke about "filling a huge void in my soul" and made comments about how her relationship with God is what helped her get through the tough choices high school students are forced to make. As the speech continued, McComb had continued to make "God" references and her microphone was then shut off administrators. McComb is declaring that this was unconstitutional based on the First Amendment, which grants her the right to have freedom of speech. Does this cross the line between separation of church and state since it is a public school? Well this brings up an interesting debate since the First Amendment grants both freedom of speech and separation of church and state. McComb was not trying to force her beliefs among her peers but only share her experiences throughout high school and what helped her achieve her academic abilities. Unfortunately, the tribulations don't discontinue with one speech. Now members of the ACLU and other "rights and freedom" activist groups are working on having the Pledge of Allegiance, (the patriotic honor children learn to say in memory of all that gave them those constitutional rights) want to take it out of public schools because the words "under God" are in it. For example, in San Francisco, Judge Lawrence Karlton ruled "the pledge's reference to one nation 'under God' violates school children's right to be free from a coercive requirement to affirm God." This decision is currently being over looked by the Supreme Court to find if this ruling was indeed sufficient according to the law of the United States. Honestly, in all three cases America is not forcing anyone to believe a certain religion, America is not forcing children to be taught about God in public schools. The Supreme Court has refused to follow through with any banning of The Pledge of Allegiance in schools, crosses as memorials in public areas, and clearly students ability to speak about their morals and values. What is the real situation on hand? Are non-believers just threatened that their children will hear "God" in school? It is a guarantee that no matter what is banned and what is not, people are going to practice and preach what they feel is right, and in these cases, as Americans we can only hope the people behind this "religious" remarks stick by their beliefs and the "under God" foundation America was built off of.