



OPERATION INCLUSION – SAMPLE OP-ED

All Americans—including religious minorities and non-theists—should be welcome to attend meetings of local government without being pressured to take part in prayer or religious worship.

This would seem to be an obvious point. After all, the United States is firmly rooted in the principle of religious freedom. No American should be made to feel like a lesser citizen because of what he or she believes (or does not believe) about religion.

Yet that is exactly what will happen to millions of Americans thanks to a recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In a 5-4 majority opinion in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, the U.S. Supreme Court wrote that official Christian prayers before meetings of local government are permissible because such legislative supplications have a long history in America.

The Court seems unable to grasp that our country has changed in more than 200 years. We're no longer a mostly Protestant country with a smattering of other faiths. In fact, we're more diverse than ever. And even though most Americans still identify as Christian, there is great diversity among those beliefs as well.

The Greece case, sponsored by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, sought to end official sectarian prayers because they can alienate citizens and pressure them to pray in a manner that violates their conscience. The plaintiffs in the case were two residents of Greece, N.Y.: Susan Galloway, a Jew, and Linda Stephens, an atheist. They simply wanted to petition their local government representatives without being coerced into participating in an act of religious worship first. It's not a lot to ask.

But between 1999 and June 2010, about two-thirds of the 120 recorded invocations at the Greece Town Board's meetings contained Christian references, such as "Jesus Christ," "Jesus," "Your Son," or the "Holy Spirit." And almost all of the prayers were delivered by Christian

clergy. In fact, as Americans United demonstrated, the town reached out to non-Christians only after AU threatened litigation.

The high court's majority doesn't see this as a problem. They even asserted that asking people to observe a sectarian prayer in a sparsely populated room is not coercive because adults attending the meetings are free to get up and leave if they don't like the particular prayer.

It is almost hard to fathom the court's naiveté. Many citizens attend meetings of local government because they want the government to take some action—perhaps issue a zoning variance or pay for better street lighting. What are the chances that someone who objects to a prayer will get up and leave the room, in full view of the very representatives she needs assistance from, right before making her request? Few citizens would have such courage or resolve.

What's especially sad about this ruling is its timing. America is becoming more diverse, and nearly one-fifth of the nation is not affiliated with any religion. Beyond that, nearly one-quarter of Americans say they do not want any prayer of any sort before government meetings. This means that appeals to majority rule aren't just offensive; they ignore the changing face of the country.

Those who support government-sponsored invocations love to mention the “tradition” of legislative prayer and the “ceremonial” value of official invocations. But the purpose of prayer is to communicate with God, not win divine sanction for a new stop sign. Even many people of faith find it demeaning to their beliefs when a deeply personal action like prayer is turned into a public spectacle in a place of the people's business.

Supreme Court rulings that restrict our religious freedoms tend to fail the test of time. For instance, in 1940, the Supreme Court ruled that public schools could compel Jehovah's Witnesses to salute the flag and recite the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, even though the Witnesses objected on grounds of conscience.

It took the court just three years to realize its mistake and overturn that ruling. I believe the Greece decision will meet a similar fate, although it may take more than three years for the court to see the error of its ways.

Until then, millions of Americans will face an unpleasant reminder that they are second-class citizens whose beliefs must yield to the will of the religious majority.

