

PRAYER AT COUNCIL MEETINGS AFFIRMED



Bill Donohue comments on the U.S. Supreme Court decision affirming the right of town council meetings to open their session with a prayer:

The U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 ruling quite properly considered, and rejected, a challenge to the customary prayers that are said at town council meetings across the nation. These prayers are ceremonial in nature, and, as former Chief Justice Warren Burger said, they are "deeply embedded in the history and tradition of the country." Indeed, the high court opens its own session with the invocation, "God save the United States and this Honorable Court."

Just because the prayers are Christian in nature is not sufficient to ban them. As the majority opinion said, there are many historical examples where sectarian prayers have been invoked, and they "must not be dismissed as the relic of a time when our Nation was less pluralistic than it is today." Moreover, in the case before the justices, "The town made reasonable efforts to identify all of the congregations located within its borders and represented that it would welcome a prayer by any minister or layman who wished to give one." If the prayers were being abused by those bent on a proselytizing campaign, that would be different.

The high court also made a distinction between taking offense at something and making claims of coercion; they are not identical. Similarly, Justice Samuel Alito was right to brush aside the long list of horrors that opponents of such prayers trotted out: anyone can dream up a list of

hypothetical situations about any case.

Perhaps the most cogent statement came from Justice Anthony Kennedy. He cautioned against judges being in the business of evaluating the content of prayer: it could lead to legislatures requiring “chaplains to redact the religious content from their message in order to make it acceptable for the public square.”

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court did not eviscerate spurious claims of religious diversity. The fact is that in 2014, 95 percent of Americans who claim a religious affiliation are Christian.