

Prayer has no place in the public square

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There is no greater threat to religious liberty than government's involvement in faith. And that's why we hope the U.S. Supreme Court rules once and for all that local government is no place for public prayer.

The co-mingling of public prayer with local government has simmered for years, stuck in a legal purgatory between the separation of church and state and constitutionally protected freedom of expression.

The upstate New York town of Greece ignited the issue a few years ago, when a newly elected supervisor began opening each town board meeting with a Christian prayer. Those in attendance were asked to bow their heads as a local minister or board member asked a Christian God for guidance and support. A federal Circuit Court backed two residents - an atheist and a Jew - who claimed the distinctly sectarian prayers violated their religious liberty and isolated them from their own government.

Supporters of public prayer often nod to the U.S. Senate and House, which both open daily sessions with consistently Christian invocations. But the lower court ruled that this analogy isn't relevant. Citizens go to their local town boards and city councils to be active participants. They go to the U.S. Senate or House to watch. Those are two different things, the court ruled.

Now the highly contentious issue falls in the laps of the nation's highest justices, the first time in 30 years the Supreme Court will take up the issue.

Public prayer proponents view the challenge as an assault on their religious liberty, an atheistic war against faith. To them, public prayer is as American as apple pie or the World Series. But the challenge of public prayer isn't about keeping God out of government. It's about keeping government out of God.

History repeatedly has shown the failings of governmental regulation over the exercise of faith. It isolates those of beliefs not backed by the public realm. It robs the non-compliant of social agency. It turns one of mankind's biggest strengths - faith - into a social hammer to bludgeon dissent and quell factious opinion.

A Times-News poll of 30 Magic Valley cities found that only one area community, Oakley, holds pre-meeting invocations. Many officials told us that publicly sanctioned prayer is a bad idea. We couldn't agree more. Oakley Mayor Larry Hinds, who instituted the public prayers two years ago, noted that his city is roughly two-thirds Mormon. But that means more than 30 percent of his constituency adheres to some different belief system.

Even members of the same faith often disagree on religious doctrine. Take the U.S. Senate vote on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a bill aimed at protecting homosexuals from

workplace discrimination. LDS members in 2011 lobbied hard in support of California's Proposition 8, banning gay marriage. But this week, Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, Dean Heller, R-Nev., and Tom Udall, D-N.M. - all members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - provided key votes to move the legislation along.

Meanwhile, Mike Crapo, Idaho; Jeff Flake, R-Ariz.; and Mike Lee, Utah - all Mormon members of the Senate GOP Caucus - voted to stall the bill.

The LDS split on the ENDA vote is simply one example of the subjective complexity of religious belief. It's one example of why religion is too big for government's monolithic approach. Ours is an overwhelmingly faith-based community. It's also one comfortable with its varied beliefs. There's no war on faith here. And a Supreme Court decision keeping government out of the most complex of human systems is the best way to assure no citizen is ever told to what god or gods he or she must bow and pray.