

Associated Press ~ April 22, 2015

Idaho's history of religious fear goes back decades

By RYAN STRUYK, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Some of Idaho's most conservative Republicans have raised concerns this year about local Muslim populations and the potential influence of Sharia law in the state.

Those fears prompted local GOP events and a special lawmaker luncheon, while culminating in the decision by some lawmakers to kill a child support enforcement bill, threatening the state's ability to administer more than 150,000 child support cases.

Historians say this isn't the first time Idaho's government has focused concern on a specific religious group.

"We have had various periods in our history when there's been discrimination against particular denominations or religions," explained Jim Weatherby, political science professor emeritus at Boise State University.

The singling out of different religious groups stretches back to the first days of Idaho Territory in 1863. Here are some notable examples.

MORMON VOTING RIGHTS

When Idaho was still a developing territory in the late 1800s, the state government — today led by prominent Mormons in both chambers — was actually hostile to Mormon settlers, according to Todd Shallat, who directs the Center for the Study of Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University.

"In Idaho history, the Mormon bloc aligned against the Republicans, who dominated the governor's office and Supreme Court," Shallat explained. "So they used that power to neutralize the Mormon vote."

Idaho's original 1890 state constitution disenfranchised anyone who practiced polygamy, encouraged polygamy or supported organizations that encouraged polygamy — like many of the Mormon pioneers who had just moved west to escape discrimination. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stopped endorsing plural marriages later that year, and in 1904 the church warned members that those entering into new plural marriages would be excommunicated.

Still, it wasn't until just three decades ago that the state removed what it called "obsolete disqualifications to vote" from the constitution.

A third of voters — more than 100,000 people — voted to keep the ban.

BASQUE CATHOLIC IMMIGRATION

Shallat also pointed to anti-Catholicism in the early 1920s as another example of religious tension in Idaho history.

Basque Americans — mostly Catholic immigrants from Spanish or French Basque country who have a substantial presence in Idaho — were singled out by the state for restrictive national immigration policies to limit Catholics coming into the United States.

Shallat said some Idahoans joined the revived Ku Klux Klan in that decade, at times burning crosses and marching against Catholic immigration, especially in Canyon County.

The sentiment in Idaho especially influenced the votes of then-U.S. Sen. William Borah, known for his isolationist views, Shallat said.

Weatherby said those views stretched up to the 1960 presidential campaign in Idaho.

"There was great concern that if Kennedy, as a Catholic, would be elected president, he would be answerable to the Pope," he explained.

HINDU SENATE PRAYER

Just five weeks before the child support enforcement bill died in committee, three GOP Senators refused to attend the chamber's daily invocation, which was given by a Hindu cleric.

Rajan Zed gave an opening prayer in both English and Sanskrit that focused on selflessness and peace. But Republican Sens. Steve Vick, Sheryl Nuxoll and Lori Den Hartog didn't come onto the floor until the prayer was over.

At the time, Nuxoll said she believed the United States was a Christian nation and that Hinduism had false gods.

Both chambers typically open with a Christian prayer from the body's own chaplain.