

Is ‘woke’ to be the only religion allowed in US public schools?

By Betsy McCaughey
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The Supreme Court is hearing a case from former high school football coach Joe Kennedy who claimed he was let go for praying after games. Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images

Over the past 60 years, public schools have been scrubbed of religion, stripped bare in the name of the US Constitution’s establishment clause, which bars favoring one religion over others. Now the void is being filled by social-justice ideology, the left’s religion by another name.

Why should traditional religion be discriminated against while [teachers and coaches are allowed to proselytize their woke belief system](#), displaying gay-pride symbols and Black Lives Matter slogans in the classroom? Are children any less at risk of coercion or indoctrination by these ideas presented by authority figures whom they’re eager to please?

That’s the inflammatory context for a [high-school football coach’s appeal to the US Supreme Court](#), which was heard Monday. Joe Kennedy, who coached for the Bremerton School District in Washington state, customarily [took a knee and prayed quietly on the 50-yard line after games](#).

Occasionally some players and attendees joined him, though he didn't call for them to participate and he often prayed alone.

Bremerton officials told him praying within sight of students violated the establishment clause and asked him to go across campus and pray in the janitor's office. Kennedy refused, arguing that would send a message that prayer is bad and must be hidden. The refusal cost him his job.

Kennedy's lawyer told the justices Monday that the firing violated the coach's right to freely practice his religion. Justice Clarence Thomas asked if Kennedy would've been fired had he taken a knee to protest racism. Justice Samuel Alito queried whether a coach taking a knee to protest the invasion of Ukraine or climate change or another political issue would've been fired.

If the reason for the firing is religion, Alito said, that's unconstitutional discrimination.



Kennedy said Bremerton School District violated his rights by asking him to not pray publicly after games. Meegan M. Reid/Kitsap Sun via AP, File

Much of the back and forth was over whether the coach's barely audible prayer amounted to government speech, which can be regulated. Probably not. He was praying after the game, when his duties were over, and his words were barely audible even to people close by.

Bremerton School District's lawyer also tried to argue that students might feel compelled to join in the prayer because the coach is an authority figure and can determine who gets the most playing time. The case could turn on that, though the facts again seem to undermine the

argument. Kennedy coached junior-varsity football, and both players who expressed personal reluctance to pray became captains of the JV team nonetheless.

Monday's oral argument signals the court is poised to welcome more religion in public life, including public schools. The question several justices posed again and again: Why should religion be singled out for disfavored treatment compared with other ideas?

That is also the question the justices [posed during oral arguments Dec. 8 in Carson V. Makin](#). Some areas of Maine are so thinly populated that towns can't afford public high schools. Instead, the state offers tuition assistance for families in these rural areas to send their children to the private schools of their choice. The hitch is state law says they must choose a secular school, not a religious one. Parents sued, challenging the religious-school exclusion.



Justice Clarence Thomas questioned if Kennedy would've been fired if he had taken a knee to protest racism. Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images

If schools that teach religion are ineligible for state money, Alito asked, are schools that teach critical race theory also ineligible? The lawyer for Maine's school system stammered and confessed he didn't know.

Alito's question was on the mark. The [National Education Association](#) and the American Federation of Teachers, the most powerful teachers unions, promote a curriculum that stresses transgenderism, white guilt, [the 1619 Project](#) and other progressive ideologies. But these unions

want no part of traditional religion. They know religion is the kiss of death for their anti-family-values agenda. Both unions [weighed in](#) with briefs to the court against Coach Kennedy.

The educational bureaucrats are fast turning public schools into temples of progressivism. Fortunately, the court appears on the verge of striking a fairer balance, protecting the rights of teachers who practice traditional religion and the rights of students to be taught by them. Parents should be glad.

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