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Religious Clubs in the Schools
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We commonly hear the charge that the Supreme Court has banned religion from our nation's public schools. Not only does last Monday's decision about the ability of a religious club to meet in an elementary school show that charge as false, but it continues a consistent set of principles which the court has put forward over the past couple of decades.

The case in question concerned the Good News Club of Milford, N.Y., which wanted to meet in a local school following school hours. The club, run by a local minister, is affiliated with the national organization Child Evangelism Fellowship, a movement that seeks to "evangelize boys and girls with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ." The club members' ages run from 6 to 12.

The point of the court's ruling is that religious groups and clubs must be treated equally with other groups and clubs in school policy. If non-religious clubs, such as a chess club, a sewing club or a history club, were allowed to meet after hours on school property, then so too should religious clubs. The religious character of the club's message or activities has no bearing on whether or not it should be allowed access to school property.

This ruling continues one of the three main principles underlying recent rulings concerning the court's view regarding religion in schools. That principle is one of neutrality, that is, all groups should be treated equally by school policy, whether religious or not. Although schools are not required to allow clubs or allow outside groups to meet on school property, if school policy permits either option, then the school may not determine eligibility on religious grounds.

The second principle was also in play. It forbids the use of schools and their prestige as tools to coerce students to take part in religious activities in which they otherwise wouldn't want to participate. The school district argued against being required to allow the club to meet because the club's explicit goal was to evangelize students, and the district did not want the use of school property to be seen as endorsing that activity -- which might be seen as coercion.

Justice Clarence Thomas, writing for the court's majority, said that the ruling "would ensure (the school's) neutrality, not threaten it." Thomas argued, "We cannot say the danger that children would misperceive the endorsement of religion is any greater than the danger that they would perceive a hostility toward the religious viewpoint if the club were excluded from the public forum." Thomas' point is that the school needs to remain neutral with regard to religion, and that treating religious clubs differently from non-religious clubs could be interpreted as anti-religious rather than neutral.

Only one of the three principles of the court's attitude toward religion in public schools was not in play in this case, that of the equal treatment of all religions. But of course should a Jewish or a Muslim group wish to meet in the school, they would need to be allowed to do so.

These three principles provide an important set of rules for religion's place not just in the schools, but in our nation's public life. They give everyone and every group a voice in this country's cultural and political life, whatever their perspective, while at the same time ensuring that no one type of group has an unfair advantage over the others or is put at an unfair disadvantage.