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Can the Government pay for Education about Religion?

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In 1999, student Joshua Davey informed the registrar's office at Northwest College in Seattle that he wanted to major in "Pastoral Ministries." The officials at this Christian college, associated with the Assemblies of God Church, in turn told him that this choice would cause him to lose his state-sponsored Promise Scholarship of \$1,125.00. Since the Washington State constitution prohibited state funding of theological education, the state would not pay for Davey to study for a degree in ministry, although the scholarship was available for any other area of study apart from theology.

Davey sued the state, claiming it violated his right to equal protection under the law as well as the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which says in part that "Congress shall make no law...prohibiting the free exercise (of religion)." The Supreme Court last week heard the arguments and will issue a ruling next summer. I will examine issues this raises for higher education in religions.

It is important to be clear just what is being denied, for there is a distinction between Religious Studies, which is the comparative study of world religions, and what Washington State calls "theology," which legal scholars have defined as a course of study "taught from a perspective intended to induce a faith or belief."

The approach of Religious Studies is a general mode of instruction that applies to all world religions and can be applied by teachers from many different religious backgrounds, learned by students of any or no religious beliefs, and taught in colleges and universities of secular or religious backgrounds.

At the University of Wyoming, for example, the Religious Studies Program teaches courses about many religions, about the founders of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, about the role of Christianity in American society, about religions' impact on film, about the Old and New Testaments, as well as the sacred texts of Islam and Buddhism -- just to mention a few courses.

The criteria of knowledge, expertise and course content in Religious Studies is evaluated by a broad field consisting of thousands of professors from across

America and around the world. By taking these courses, students can learn about religions to which they do or do not belong, which impact their lives on a regular basis or which are so distant from them as to be unknown. This approach to the study of religion fits the academic approach to knowledge in other fields taught in higher education and as such, in Washington State, is eligible for the Promise Scholarship.

Courses taught from a perspective intended to induce belief are quite different. They are not accessible to students of all religious backgrounds, but only to members of a particular faith. The teachers do not derive their knowledge and approach from a broad academic field, but from within the theological boundaries of their specific religious tradition. Only the particular religion is taught, other religions or traditions usually are mentioned only to indicate how they agree or disagree. In the end, there is no general knowledge or understanding of religions being taught, only knowledge and understanding of a single particular religion or tradition within that religion. It is largely done to educate followers so they can perpetuate the religion.

This latter approach to religious education is perfectly fine, in and of itself. All religions do this in some way or another. The question before the court is whether the government should subsidize this type of education. Historically, the U.S. and state governments have not done so, but have specifically avoided involvement in religious education.

If the court should decide that the government should fund "theological" education, then within a few years, I think, it will be a funding source for all religions in the United States, from mainstream Protestantism to Catholicism, from Judaism to Islam, and indeed, for all religions that teach in a college or university setting. Such a change would radically reshape not only the educational structure of this country, but would impact its budget debates and its taxation policies.