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Swearing on the Holy Scriptures
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When witnesses take the stand in a court trial, they take an oath in which they swear to tell the truth. In most states, the witnesses swear this oath by placing their hand on a Christian Bible.

The Bible came into use because it was believed that its sacred character would link the oath to God and hence encourage the witness to speak the truth before God, if not before the human court. So although the state administers the oath using the Bible, it is the individual who receives the effect of the oath.

But consider the following scenario described in the June 23rd issue of *The Daily News of Jacksonville, N.C.*:

Imagine that you are a key witness to a major crime -- you are called to court to testify. A man's life hangs in the balance. You know your attention to detail will be crucial. You know your credibility will be called into question.

Your name is called in court, and you approach the witness stand. Next comes the time-honored courtroom tradition -- swearing to tell the truth.

You raise your right hand and lower your left hand to that holy book that represents your faith.

But wait. Something's wrong. That's not the Bible you're swearing on. It's a book of Hindu scriptures, or "vedas." What's going on? Why should you be swearing an oath on a book that does not represent your own religion? You object, but the judge forces you to, in essence, swear an oath that violates your own religion! You can't refuse, or you will be found in contempt.

Sound farfetched? It happens every day in North Carolina.

Of course, Christians aren't being forced to swear on someone else's "bible;" it's folks who practice other religions who do so.

This scenario imagined by *The Daily News* points out the problem with the North Carolina law, common in other states as well, that requires all

witnesses to swear on the Bible and does not allow the sacred texts of other religions to be used.

The question of the Quran's use in North Carolina courts became an issue last month when Guilford County Judge W.D. Albright refused the attempt by a local Muslim group to donate copies of the Quran to the court system for use in swearing in Muslim witnesses. He ruled, "an oath on the Quran is not a lawful oath under our law."

The matter hinged upon the interpretation of the state's law which said that the oath should be taken on the "Holy Scriptures." Judge Albright took the narrowest possible interpretation of the law and understood it to refer only to the Christian Bible (although he did not indicate whether he thought the Catholic or Protestant version should be used).

But the term "Holy Scriptures" is not specific to Christianity, even though used frequently by Christians. It is a generic term which simply means "sacred texts." Since all religions that use writing have sacred texts, the law can be understood to allow the use of those texts in oath-taking. The state legislature apparently understood this distinction when in 1985 it changed the law from the Christian-specific requirement to swear upon "the Gospels" to its present reading.

Judge Albright's ruling causes three problems. First, for non-Christian witnesses, it prevents the connection between a believer and their god that was the original intent of the law, one which would encourage truth-telling. Second, it puts the government in the position of favoring one religion over all others, which is prohibited by the First Amendment. Third, it fails to grant all citizens equal treatment under the law by allowing only Christians, but no one else, to swear upon their own holy book.

Judge Albright may think he is simply interpreting the law as written, but his ruling has set in motion the reconsideration of the religious implications of the rights of American citizens, a reconsideration which recognizes the expanding variety of religious beliefs and practices in our country