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Opinion

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MISSOULIAN EDITORIAL

First Amendment isn't anti-education

SUMMARY: Nothing in the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom says education must be truncated.

Here we go again: A teacher in California last Monday filed a lawsuit after school administrators told him he couldn't give his students excerpts from the Declaration of Independence and other historical documents that refer to God.

The ban followed a complaint from a parent presumably concerned that the teacher, Steven Williams, was promoting religion to his class of fifth-graders. As detailed in the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Jose, Calif., Williams is a devout Christian who thinks his students ought to know something about America's founding fathers, including the role religion played in their lives and beliefs. From the sounds of it, Williams' superiors have been trying to keep him on a tight leash, requiring, for instance, that he submit lesson plans and class materials for careful review; since last May, his principal has rejected all lessons and class handouts that contain any references to God and Christianity, according to the lawsuit.

Public schools do, indeed, have to guard against proselytizing in the classroom. As government institutions, public schools are subject to the First Amendment's prohibition against promoting religion. That was the basis of a 2002 ruling from the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which said recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools is unconstitutional because it includes a reference to God. The U.S. Supreme Court overturned that decision on a technicality. Perhaps this new lawsuit will provide another opportunity to address the issue head-on. It would be helpful if they did just that.

The First Amendment doesn't say what some people think it says. It doesn't forbid any mention of God in a government institution. What it says, precisely, is, "Congress shall make no law respecting establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ... "

Is it possible to differentiate between discussing religion and establishing an official American religion? Is it possible to talk about some religions without inhibiting people from practicing other religions? We'd better hope so. Otherwise, it's virtually impossible to understand world events, such as the war on terror, the war in Iraq, the Sept. 11 attacks, conflict in the Middle East or violence in Sudan. Without mention of religion, history makes no sense. Without mentioning religion, no one's going to understand some of the things the president of the United States says and does or even make sense of this past election. Too much of art, literature, cultures and even some issues in science defy understanding outside a context that includes religion.

Education, as most of us might define the term, is impossible without some acknowledgement and understanding of religion. The Bill of Rights prevents the government from endorsing or suppressing religions. That prohibition shouldn't be twisted into a stifling of education.