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## Feelings trumping rights

By David Limbaugh

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Did you hear about the University of Wisconsin -- Eau Claire (UWEC) banning resident assistants (RAs) from leading Bible studies in their own dormitories? That's the subject of my latest e-mail blast from the ever-vigilant Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE).

This outrageous, indefensible assault on Christian religious liberties provides a perfect opportunity for the church-state separation crusaders to prove they're really devoted to religious liberty, as they claim. Let's see if they protest.

An UWEC official sent RAs a letter forbidding them from leading Bible studies because students might conclude that such RAs were not "approachable." Don't laugh. Violators, warned the letter, would be subject to disciplinary action. Of course, the letter also purported to prohibit Koran and Torah studies, but it appears such studies were not even at issue.

"Wall of separation" advocates insist their primary goal is to prevent government from promoting religion. The "wall," they say, is what has been responsible for our nation's unparalleled religious liberty.

But the only wall of separation the Framers erected, via the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, was that prohibiting the federal government from establishing a national church or religion. Why? Because a compulsory, state-supported religion would stifle religious liberty, an evil the Framers' ancestors sailed the Atlantic to escape. The thrust of the Establishment Clause was to promote religious freedom.

Not content to stop there, the Framers also included the "Free Exercise" clause, which expressly forbade Congress from making any law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. Clearly, then, the focus of the first two clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution is religious liberty.

Church-state separation zealots have often selectively applied their wall of separation. They have consistently screamed bloody murder at any whiff of Christianity in the public square, especially when there is the remotest suggestion that government is merely countenancing Christianity (far from endorsing it). But they've sat idly by as the state has outright endorsed other religions or worldviews or their values.

It is mostly Christianity and its values (and perceived intolerance) they oppose, not the state endorsement of religion. I suppose if you could ever force them to be honest with themselves, they would grudgingly concede the point, while justifying it on the basis that Christianity, with its pervasiveness in this country, is the only religion whose dominant influence (and very nature) jeopardizes our tradition of religious liberty. (Of course, that is absurd on its face, since America is the freest nation in history largely because of its Christian roots.)

In their zeal to honor the wall of separation between state and Christianity with the ostensible goal of promoting religious liberty the secularists have trampled on that very liberty. That is, by twisting the Establishment Clause beyond recognition, they have, in many cases, emasculated the Free Exercise Clause.

This has happened most prominently in public schools, where in their mania to prohibit the state (the public school) from endorsing religion, they have suppressed the free exercise rights of the students. For example, schools sometimes forbid references to Christ by commencement speakers, because they apparently believe that to

permit students to voluntarily exercise their religious freedom or expression is tantamount to the state endorsing the Christian religion.

But the state is no more endorsing the Christian religion by permitting the valedictorian's reference to Christ than the government is endorsing my convincing arguments in this essay by not infringing on my freedom to express (and publish) these profundities.

In the case of UWEC's ban on RA-led Bible studies, if we give the school the benefit of a huge, unwarranted doubt, we could conclude that it wasn't specifically targeting Christianity, since it nominally applied the ban to other religions.

But either way, it is still grossly infringing on the free exercise rights of its RAs and its students, all in the interest of avoiding any appearance of "unapproachability" on the part of the RAs.

You see, the presumption often adopted by our cultural elite is that Christianity is, on its face, intolerant. Doesn't everyone know that any RA who would lead a Bible study is less approachable, especially to members of other religions?

In the name of protecting all hypersensitive students' non-existent constitutional right to be free from the slightest discomfort at the hands of the state (most of which anticipated discomfort is likely a figment of the imagination of those paranoid about Christianity), this university has chosen to violate the most important right our Constitution does guaranty: religious liberty.

The only "separating" usually being done by the fabled "wall" is the severance of religious liberties, mostly Christian, from the Constitution.

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