

Table of Contents

- ***Religious freedom not a US priority toward allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia***
 - ***Oregon's fashion police***
 - ***"Legal battle over religious freedom a lesson for employers"***
 - ***Courts face new challenges in faith healing cases***
 - ***Florida: Sect accused of violence***
 - ***Sikhs challenge US Army's ban on turbans and beards***
 - ***Leader of sect gets support from former members***
 - ***Cults or alternative religions?***
 - ***Muslim woman asked to leave line at bank over head scarf***
-

Religious freedom not a US priority toward allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia

ICC (23.11.2009) / HRWF (24.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A hearing was recently held on Religious Freedom in the Middle East which exposed the failure of the State Department and President Obama to address Human Rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

On November 18, Chairman, Gary L. Ackerman (D-NY), as well as other congress representatives, questioned the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael H. Posner, on the State of Political and Religious Freedom in the Middle East. It was evident that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both close allies of the US, have not been pressured into compliance with international human rights laws.

Egypt, the world's number two recipient of American aid, having received roughly \$1.3 billion per year in military compensation and more than \$500 million per year in economic assistance since 1979, blatantly violates international human rights laws without penalty. The responsibility for the sudden surge of persecution against Coptic Christians, an explicit assault on religious freedom, is deliberately dismissed by the Egyptian government. When Assistant Secretary Posner was asked if measures are being taken to ensure that Egypt is kept liable for its offenses, no strategic plan was presented. It was also concluded that America does not use its foreign assistance as leverage to demand that Egypt adhere to international human rights laws.

In the same way, Saudi Arabia, a government that denies recognition or protection of any religion other than Sunni Islam, and whose constitutional principles are founded on Sharia law, is not held accountable by the US for its human rights abuses.

When asked by Representative Ackerman if the US places any conditionality upon trade with Saudi Arabia or aid given to Egypt in regards to human rights offenses, Assistant Secretary Posner replied, "Has it been done? It's been done... in various ways and various places. Could it be done more? Yes. Should it be done more? Yes."

Aidan Clay, ICC Regional Manager of the Middle East, said, "Avoiding a strategic plan to address the fundamental democratic principles of religious freedom has not been a top priority of the US government toward Egypt for years. The US is a light to democratic values, and must take the lead in promoting and exporting democratic principles to countries that violate human rights laws. We ask President Obama to develop a strategic plan by applying human rights sanctions on US assistance to Egypt and US dealings with

Saudi Arabia, to nominate a Religious Freedom Ambassador, and to affirm human rights as a core objective of US foreign policy."

Oregon's fashion police

By David Waters

Washington Post (17.07.2009) / HRWF (18.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Should your child's teacher wear a turban, a hijab, a kippah or other "religious dress"? The state of Oregon doesn't think so. The Oregon Workplace Religious Freedom Act – [http://www.saldef.org/attachments/SB786_\(Oregon_WRFA\).pdf](http://www.saldef.org/attachments/SB786_(Oregon_WRFA).pdf) – (,now awaiting the governor's signature, requires all employers to let workers wear religious items with one exception: "No teacher in any public school shall wear any religious dress while engaged in the performance of duties as a teacher."

The proposed law has set up a classic religious liberty battle between the First Amendment's Establishment clause, which tells government not to favor (or disfavor) one religion over another, and the Free Exercise clause, which tells government to leave the religious alone. The new law also reflects the increasing difficulty of accommodating a widening variety of religious faiths in a pluralistic society.

Organizations representing Sikhs and Muslims claim the new law would unconstitutionally limit their religious freedom. They are asking Gov. Ted Kulongoski to veto the bill. "In effect," argues the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, "observant Sikh Americans would still be barred from working as teachers in the public schools of Oregon because of their religiously-mandated dastaars (turbans), and observant Jews and Muslims would also be subjected to the ignominy of having to choose between religious freedom and a teaching career in the State of Oregon."

But Oregon's Department of Education argues that public schools are obligated to maintain religious neutrality: "The underlying policy reflects the unique position that teachers occupy," spokesman Jake Weigler told the Oregonian. "In this case, the concern that a public school teacher would be imparting religious values to their students outweighs that teacher's right to free expression."

Not quite, argues the Council on American-Islamic Relations: "Those who wear religiously-mandated attire are not proselytizing; they are practicing their faith, a right guaranteed by the Constitution. Concerns about religious neutrality in schools can be adequately addressed through professional codes of conduct," spokesman Ibrahim Hooper says in a statement.

Oregon already bans teachers from wearing "religious dress." The new law allows other workers to wear religious items while maintaining the ban for teachers only. The Oregon ban was tested in the 1980s when a Sikh teacher was suspended for wearing a white turban and white clothes to class.

"In its 1986 decision *Cooper v. Eugene School District*, the Oregon Supreme Court . . . upheld the state law, (writing) that "the aim of maintaining the religious neutrality of the public schools furthers a constitutional obligation beyond an ordinary policy preference of the legislature," the First Amendment Center reports. Courts also have upheld a similar law in Pennsylvania.

Turbans, kippahs, headscarves and other items of clothing obviously qualify as "religious dress." But what about crosses, Stars of David, the Hindu tilaka (forehead marks), or other religious symbols that are less apparent? What about "religious dress" that isn't at

all apparent, such as undergarments worn by Latter-day Saints or long hair or beards worn by some for religious reasons? Who gets to decide?

On the other hand, most schools have basic dress codes for teachers and students. If schools can ban tank tops or gang symbols, why not turbans or religious symbols?

"Legal battle over religious freedom a lesson for employers"

By Jack Maher

9News.com (17.07.2009) / HRWF (18.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The operator of the Vail and Keystone ski resorts will pay \$80,000 and furnish other relief to settle a religious and gender discrimination lawsuit filed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. We took a look at the case with Denver Labor Law Attorney Kim Ryan on 9NEWS 6 a.m.

Lawsuit Details

According to the EEOC's lawsuit, Lisa Marie Cornwell, an emergency services supervisor who worked for The Vail Corporation at the Keystone Resort, was subjected to harassment based on her Christian religion and her sex, denied religious accommodation and treated less favorably than her male colleagues.

The EEOC said that Cornwell's supervisor, Rick Garcia, forbade her and another Christian employee from even discussing their Christian beliefs with one another while at work, and would not allow them to listen to Christian music while on duty, because it might offend other employees, but had no similar restrictions on music with profanity or lyrics promoting violence against women, which were offensive to Cornwell.

Additionally, according to the EEOC, Garcia ridiculed Cornwell for asking for scheduling accommodation so that she could attend her preferred religious services, and denied her requests while scheduling lower ranking officers for the shifts she requested. Also, Garcia created and tolerated a sexually hostile work environment where he and other male employees made offensive sexual comments and jokes in the workplace, the EEOC alleged.

Her supervisor made sexually derogatory comments, such as women were for "things like staying home, cooking, and making babies, making graphic sexual comments about women's bodies, stating that "women are dumber than men," and talking about employees sexually at work, according to court papers filed by Cornwell's attorney, Laurie Scott Paddock.

The supervisor also said, "Which is more important, church or your job?," "I don't think God will hate you if you don't make it to church because of work," and "Christianity is a joke," according to court papers.

Cornwell complained to various Keystone managers and human resource staff about the harassment and being scheduled to miss her religious services on Sundays, but according to the EEOC no action was taken to resolve the problems. EEOC alleged that Cornwell was fired in retaliation for her last complaint, made less than ten days before her termination.

What was Vail's position?

Vail denied interfering with Cornwell's religion and claimed that it complied with all policies and procedures in all personnel actions and decisions and acted in a non-discriminatory and non-retaliatory manner, according to court papers filed in the case. Vail alleged that it terminated Cornwell for legitimate, nondiscriminatory and non-retaliatory reasons.

It claimed that her pain and suffering was the result of other personal experiences and said she could have prevented the conduct of which she complained.

Vail Resorts issued this statement:

"We're shocked that the EEOC would issue a news release that repeats only unproven allegations and fails to mention our adamant denials of any wrongdoing in this case. Their news release leaves the impression that we have either ignored or condoned these allegations and that the case was decided in the EEOC's favor. Nothing could be further from the truth," said Rob Katz, chief executive officer of Vail Resorts.

"We settled this case for various other reasons, not because we admitted any wrongdoing, and we absolutely do not tolerate or condone any form of discrimination or harassment of our employees or guests."

"Vail Resorts is committed to creating a quality work environment which makes full and effective use of the talents and contributions of all employees without regard to age, color, gender, pregnancy, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, status as a disabled veteran or veteran or any other status protected by federal, state or local law," said Rob Katz, chief executive officer for Vail Resorts.

"Vail Resorts already provides training to its employees and supervisors regarding discrimination and retaliation and, regardless of the settlement, will continue that training to promote a positive and respectful workplace environment," Katz added.

The EEOC's news release states as "fact" what are only unproven allegations, and does not refer to any evidence to support those allegations. The news release includes a quote from the EEOC regional attorney stating that Cornwell was "flatly denied accommodation" to pursue her religious activities.

In fact, even Cornwell admitted, during the course of the case, that she was allowed to trade shifts to attend her preferred religious activities, which is one of the EEOC's own recommendations to companies for providing an appropriate accommodation.

Furthermore, Cornwell's supervisor, not only hired Cornwell twice, but he also made the decision to promote her four separate times. Her final promotion was to be second in charge to his position. In fact, the supervisor has a solid history of promoting women, regardless of their faith or religious activities, both before and after Cornwell's employment. He terminated Cornwell's employment because he believed she had lied to the Company about her involvement in an internal security investigation, and asked a fellow employee to lie for her as well.

What does the law say?

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires that employers provide reasonable accommodation for the religious practices and beliefs of employees.

According to the EEOC, Cornwell could have been scheduled so that she could attend her religious services, without any cost or disruption to Vail's business operations, and the company was required by law to make some such accommodation. Also, Title VII

prohibits workplace harassment based on religion or gender. The EEOC filed suit after first attempting to reach a voluntary settlement.

"Title VII imposes an affirmative obligation on employers to accommodate employees' religious practices and beliefs when possible. When Congress added this provision to the statute, they expected employers to cooperate with employees to work out some reasonable accommodation.

The environment in this case, where the employee was not only flatly denied accommodation, but also ridiculed for even asking, is unacceptable," emphasized Regional Attorney Mary Jo O'Neill of the EEOC's Phoenix District Office, whose jurisdiction includes Colorado.

Are these claims on the rise?

According to EEOC Denver Field Director Nancy Sienko, "Claims of religious discrimination have increased by more than 80 percent in the last ten years. We are seeing more and more of these cases, and have litigated several in the last few years. The EEOC will continue to vigorously enforce the statutes prohibiting this behavior."

What's next for this case? Under the settlement, Vail will pay Cornwell \$80,000 and provide training for all of its Keystone employees on religious accommodation and prohibited harassment and retaliation. Ms. Cornwell said, "I am particularly pleased about Vail's agreement to conduct training on religious accommodation to help ensure that future employees will not be discriminated against in the same manner."

The EEOC is responsible for enforcing federal laws prohibiting employment discrimination. Further information about the EEOC is available on its web site at www.eeoc.gov

Courts face new challenges in faith healing cases

By Rose French

AP (30.06.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Though most states have child abuse laws allowing religious exemptions for parents who shun medicine for their sick children, recent cases have raised the thorny legal issues for parents following less-recognized faiths.

Historically, many of the parents addressed by the laws have embraced faiths like Pentecostalism and Christian Science, while others are Jehovah's Witnesses — all established denominations that the law has gradually taken into account.

It's harder for judges to decide cases involving parents who don't belong to a well-known denomination, yet also don't believe in using medicine for their kids. Legal and religious scholars say it's becoming more difficult for courts to decide when to honor the religious beliefs of parents and when to order conventional medical treatment for extremely sick children.

The manslaughter trial of an Oregon couple who claim they were following their religious beliefs in the 2008 pneumonia death of their 1-year-old daughter was to begin Monday. Carl and Raylene Worthington are members of Followers of Christ Church, which has been investigated for past child deaths.

In Tennessee, Jacqueline Crank and her minister Ariel Sherman face child neglect charges in the death of her 15-year-old daughter Jessica, who died in 2002 with a basketball-sized tumor on her shoulder. Prosecutors say based on Sherman's advice, the girl's mother relied on prayer instead of medicine.

Sherman has been accused of being a cult leader whose Universal Life Church is not a legitimate religion. He has denied such charges and says the church is Christian-based and embraces the Bible.

Believers in faith healing point to a Biblical verse in the Epistle of James, which describes how church elders should be called in to pray over the sick. There's no mention of doctors, and literalists interpret it to mean medical treatment should be eschewed over prayer.

Gregory P. Isaacs, an attorney for Crank, who's out on bond, argues that Tennessee's religious exemption law is untested and too vague.

"It really has a tremendous amount of problems," Isaacs said. "What is an organized religion and what is an ordained minister? What illnesses can you attempt to heal by faith? Those are the two pitfalls in the statute. That's not what's really clear."

Jim Dwyer, a William and Mary Law School professor who's written articles about and participated in litigation on the topic, said it's often more complicated for courts to discern cases with unaffiliated religions because judges and juries aren't as familiar with them and are skeptical of their legitimacy.

"The Supreme Court has adopted a very broad definition of religion," Dwyer said. "But ... you have to show sincere religious beliefs. Some judges might be skeptical of sincerity if it's something they've never heard of, if the person says, 'I don't belong to a certain church. I just have some beliefs that I saw on the Internet,' or 'In our own home, we've developed this set of beliefs.'"

Dr. Ellen Wright Clayton, a pediatrician and co-director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University, says when treatment for an illness is very toxic and the prognosis is dire, courts tend to rule parents don't have to pursue medical treatment. If that's not the case, courts are likely to order the treatment.

"Until medicine became effective, there was no push to say we absolutely have to do medical treatment. There wasn't this notion of deference (to religion) until medicine began to work and to become institutionally powerful."

Besides the states that have religious exemption laws, five states — Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska and North Carolina — have repealed such laws.

Many of the exemption laws were enacted in the 1970s. Rita Swan, director of the Sioux City, Iowa-based advocacy group Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty, which lobbies states to repeal such laws, said that since 1975, there have been at least 274 known cases of U.S. children who have died after medical care was withheld on religious grounds.

She says the majority of such cases are still associated with established denominations like Pentecostalism, though "the Internet has opened up some more possibilities than it did before" and there have been some cases involving unaffiliated denominations.

At least two recent high-profile cases involve parents whose beliefs were drawn from Internet-based religious groups.

Authorities in Minnesota convinced a judge to force 13-year-old Daniel Hauser into chemotherapy, prompting his mother Colleen to skip a court hearing and — with her son in tow — go on the run for nearly a week in May.

They headed to Southern California, where they considered a trip into Mexico for alternative cancer treatments, before eventually returning to the Hausers' home in Sleepy Eye, Minn., about 100 miles southwest of the Twin Cities. The boy has since received chemotherapy treatments, which appear to be working.

The family prefers natural healing practices suggested by an Internet-based group called the Nemenhah Band, which says it follows American Indian beliefs.

In Wisconsin, a jury convicted Leilani Neumann, of Weston, Wis., of second-degree reckless homicide in May for failing to rush her 11-year-old daughter Madeline Kara Neumann to a doctor. She died of untreated diabetes in March 2008.

Prosecutors argued she killed the girl by ignoring obvious symptoms — she couldn't walk or talk and was believed to be in a coma — until it was too late. The mother testified she didn't realize her daughter was so ill and did all she could to help, in line with the family's belief in faith healing.

Neumann sought the spiritual assistance of the online evangelical Christian ministry Unleavened Bread Ministries.

In the wake of the Wisconsin case, Swan said legislators there are considering a bill that would repeal the state's religious exemption to its child abuse and neglect law.

"In the U.S. under the First Amendment, we're not supposed to be establishing religion or carving out any preferences for prestigious religions," Swan said. "The courts should not be giving any kind of deference to established denominations and making any distinctions."

Florida: Sect accused of violence

By Christi Parsons

Tribune Newspapers (22.06.2009) / HRWF (24.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The leader of the Church of Scientology struck his subordinates numerous times and set an example for physical violence among the religion's management team, four former high-ranking executives told a newspaper for a story published Sunday.

Executives who have since left the organization, including Mike Rinder, who oversaw the church's legal and media relations operations, told The St. Petersburg Times that they witnessed David Miscavige, chairman of the board that oversees the church, hit staff members dozens of times, often without warning.

In a response to the paper, the church denied the allegations, saying that the four former executives statements were "absolute and total lies," and the claims are an effort to tarnish Miscavige.

Sikhs challenge US Army's ban on turbans and beards

Military service is in Captain Kamaljit Singh Kalsi's blood

AP (16.06.2009) / HRWF (19.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - His father and grandfather were part of India's Air Force. His great-grandfather served in the British Indian army. So when US Army recruiters talked to him during his first year of medical school, he readily signed up.

But his plans to go on active duty next month are now on hold. An Army policy from the 1980s that regulates the wearing of religious items would mean he would need to shave his beard and remove the turban he wears in accordance with his religious precepts.

Kalsi and another Sikh man with the same concerns, Second Lieutenant Tejdeep Singh Rattan, are the centerpieces of an advocacy campaign launched by the Sikh Coalition as it tries to persuade the Army to let them serve without sacrificing their articles of faith.

"I'm an American, there's no reason why I can't serve," Kalsi, 32, said.

The Army has a long-standing interest in how its members carry themselves, with policies that ban exotic hair colors, long fingernails or certain colors of lipstick. Army officials declined to comment on the reasoning behind its policy that would force the Sikh men to give up their religious displays. Sikhs who were active-duty military when the policy was adopted were allowed to continue serving without shaving their beards or removing their turbans.

The Pentagon and other military institutions would not comment.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation, an advocacy group, was unfamiliar with the policy's origins.

As the Sikh diaspora has spread across the world, the issue of turbans and beards on Sikhs in uniform has come up in a number of places. In New York City, for example, Sikh traffic officers took successful legal action to force the city to allow them to wear turbans and beards.

The Sikh community is hopeful it will win the policy appeal; in an April 29 letter to the Sikh Coalition, the director of the Army's Human Resources Policy Directorate said senior leadership was aware of the issue and was gathering information to make a decision. Toni Delancey, a spokeswoman for Army personnel, said the appeals were under review.

Sikh Coalition executive director Amardeep Singh said he hoped that not only are Kalsi and Rattan allowed to serve, but that the rule would be changed for all turbaned and bearded Sikhs who would want to enlist.

"Our country's military needs to reflect what America is right now," he said. "It's a diverse country, it's a country that puts forth for the rest of the world the values of liberty, particularly religious liberty."

Allowing Sikhs to serve with beard and turban "will send a very strong message to the rest of the world that we are who we say we are," he said.

The Sikh faith requires adherents to follow certain rules, among them that hair is not to be cut and for men, the wearing of a turban. Both Kalsi, an emergency room doctor, and Rattan, a dental surgeon, say they were following those rules when they were recruited and never had any problems or were told they would not be able to serve with their beards or turbans.

Both said they raised the issue over the years and were reassured, and that it was not until the end of last year when they were told they would not be allowed to serve as they were.

The idea that he would have to choose between his country and his faith is hard for Rattan.

"I'm offering my life, but I'm not willing to sacrifice my religious beliefs," he said.

Singh said it would be in the military's best interest to let Sikhs serve. The community has a long tradition of military service, both in India, where most of the faith's adherents are, as well as in the countries where Sikhs have made their homes, like Canada and the UK.

"As part of our religious heritage, we're taught that we have an obligation to actively serve and protect the communities in which we live," he said.

In Canada, regulations for the armed forces allow Sikhs to keep their turbans and beards and even determine what colors the different military branches can wear. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police allows turbans as well.

The British Army allows Sikhs to generally keep their articles of faith. For Sikhs who serve as civilian police officers, the British Police Sikh Association is pushing for development of bulletproof turbans. That would allow Sikhs to be part of firearms units, since safety helmets do not fit over them.

Leader of sect gets support from former members

By George Hesselberg

Wisconsin State Journal (01.06.2009) / HRWF (02.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The properties involved in this lawsuit are the vestiges of Alan Bushey's temporal realm. He faced three felony and two misdemeanor criminal charges, including hiding a corpse, but pleaded no contest last February to that count.

One felony — causing mental harm to a child — was dismissed. Another felony on the same charge was dismissed, but was read in to the record, as were the two misdemeanors for theft.

Sentencing is set for July 22.

The court record shows four letters of support, including two from Carol Newland, who lived at 5453 Shrine Road but now lives in New Lisbon. Newland, a retired state employee, wrote of Bushey's support for the "New Era," and said she and other members were certain that "Alvina" (Middlesworth) and her "apparent death was a final test," that she would be "brought back" and all would "be off to the New Era, where God's Will would be done at all times."

Newland wrote that, to Bushey, money was a "non-issue."

Another supporter, Sister Mary of Joseph Sumler, said she had known Bushey since 1997 and added that, with all he has lost, "he has suffered enough."

She also mentioned the death of Middlesworth in a letter, writing that "during the time we thought Sister Terese (Alvina) went to sleep, for what we considered waiting for her resurrection, there was absolutely no discussion between us to keep this a secret so that the money would continue to come in.

"We believed that she was going to come back and that was our focus," she wrote.

Cults or alternative religions?

By Mathew N. Schmalz

Washington Post (31.03.2009) / HRWF (03.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Baltimore mother accused of joining a cult and starving her child says she was acting on her religious beliefs. What's the difference between extreme religious conviction and delusion? Between a religion and a cult?

The sad death of Javon Thompson raises difficult issues regarding parental responsibility, religious liberty, and the intervention of the state. Javon was starved to death by his mother, Ria Ramkissoon, a member of "One Mind Ministries." Media reports, evidently reflecting the evaluation of law enforcement officials, have portrayed Ria Ramkissoon as a "brainwashed" member of a "cult." Amid the confusion and sensationalism surrounding the case, one thing is clear: presuming a distinction between a "cult" and a "religion" does not help us understand anything about the dynamics of alternative religions.

Within the academic study of religion, "cult" is used with great caution. When "cult" is employed as a descriptive category, it is to distinguish new religions from "sects" or offshoots of larger religious groups. But this is something quite different from how "cult" is used within the contemporary media. So called "cult-experts" will often provide a list of "cult" characteristics: unquestioning loyalty to a charismatic leader; denial of family contacts; belief in the immanent end of the world; aggressive proselytizing; and a propensity for violence. But from this perspective, anything from a Buddhist monastic community to the Marine Corps could potentially be labeled a "cult." What makes a "cult" is not its intrinsic character, but its position vis-à-vis those who wish to label it.

For example, in my classes on New Religious Movements, I often have students lay out the characteristics they associate with the term "cult." I then have them reflect upon whether or not Catholicism would meet these criteria. Often I supplement the discussion by providing sample critiques of Catholicism from evangelical Christian sources that portray the Catholic Church as the quintessential example of a "cult." The point is not that Catholicism, or any other religion, is a "cult." Instead, the point is that the very term "cult" reflects highly contested, and contestable, assumptions about what constitutes "normal" or "healthy" religiosity. Simply put, one person's fanatic is another person's saint.

The problem with relying on the term "cult" is that it can distract our attention from understanding the belief systems of alternative religious movements. This is especially the case when brainwashing is identified as a distinctive "cult" practice. As a theory explaining conversion, brainwashing has been found to be inadequate on a number of levels. First, there is no credible empirical way to establish that the brains of "brainwashed" "cult" members have actually been changed. Second, brainwashing theories when applied to "cult's" often rely on a questionable analogy with totalitarian nation states. Third, brainwashing theory overly simplifies the complex continuum between human free will and compulsion: as humans we are neither completely free nor completely subject to external control. The crucial point is this: if we understand cult membership as a simple function of "brainwashing," we are likely to dismiss self-

evidently religious beliefs as relevant only to the extent that they reflect the "cult's" coercive power.

The beliefs embraced by alternative religions are part and parcel of their appeal. In order to understand alternative religions, and to develop sound policy with regard to them, we must engage these groups not as "cults" but as "religions." The often tragic impact of ignoring a group's belief structure can be seen in the aftermath of the raid in Waco, Texas. By dismissing Branch Davidian interpretations of scripture as reflections of David Koresh's pathology, the Federal Government unwittingly confirmed, and played a deadly role in, the Branch Davidians' understanding of the fulfillment of divine prophecy. We ignore the beliefs of alternative religions not only at their peril, but ours as well.

The confusions and tensions surrounding "cults" are undeniably manifest in the case of the death of Javon Thompson. In reports from law enforcement, we find little specific information about the beliefs of "One Mind Ministries," other than the central role of a charismatic leader named "Queen Antoinette" and the use of marijuana smoke to "cleanse the spirit." What we hear instead are details about particular mechanisms of control such as the confiscation of cell phones. Oddly enough, there is a proviso that charges against Ria Ramkissoon will be dropped if Javon is resurrected. While this might be a necessary concession for a plea bargain, this seems to recognize the importance of the "cult's" belief structure. But the implications of this recognition are immediately undermined by the expectation that the Ramkissoon undergo "deprogramming"--itself a coercive practice that very much resembles the process of "brainwashing" as popularly understood.

Given the background of Javon Thompson's family, a much better approach would be to consider the cultural and social context in which "One Mind Ministries" arose along with appreciating the specific beliefs that shaped the treatment of children. Spiritual healing, prophecy, coercive forms of discipline, and the use of intoxicants are hardly new phenomena since one finds them, in some shape or form, in most every religious tradition. Of course, one could argue that religion itself is delusional, but that polemical position has problems of its own. The presumption should be that followers of Queen Antoinette are responsible for their actions: even if they gave up their autonomy to her, they did so as a result of decisions they themselves made.

One of the appeals of using the term "cult" is that questions about religious liberty can be easily avoided. "Cults" don't have rights; "religions" do. But established religions can and do practice violence, coercion, and chicanery--if one accepts those as crucial makers of being a "cult." While some might argue that "true religion" is somehow separate from such things, anyone would be hard pressed to find an example that meets such pristine standards. The issue is not charting out some idealized vision of what religion should be. Instead, the issue is discerning appropriate restraints on religious liberty in relation to the common good.

Clearly, the state does have an interest in protecting the welfare of children. How that is defined in specific cases is much more complex. In the case of Javon Thompson, for example, there seems to have been the deliberate infliction of harm beyond what would be considered socially acceptable. Similar cases have arisen with regard to dismissing medical attention. While courts in this country have routinely argued in favor of a competent individual's right to decline treatment, they have ruled against parents who claimed a right to refuse life-saving measures for a dependent minor. While such a position is not without its difficulties, it does represent a reasonable balance between religious liberty and the interests of the state to protect children from harm.

As sad as the case is, making a distinction between a "cult" and a "religion" does nothing to help us to respond to the death of Javon Thompson or to understand "One Mind

Ministries." The term "cult" is a simply a pejorative term for religions that many of us cannot, or will not, understand.

Muslim woman asked to leave line at bank over head scarf

By Matt Zaptosky

Washington Post (10.03.2009) / HRWF (11.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Muslim woman was asked to leave her place in line at a credit union in Southern Maryland and be served in a back room because the head scarf she wore for religious reasons violated the institution's "no hats, hoods or sunglasses" policy, the woman said yesterday.

The incident at the Navy Federal Credit Union on Saturday was the second in a month for Kenza Shelley, and Muslim advocates fear it could become a problem nationwide as many financial institutions, intent on curbing robberies and identity theft, ban hats and similar items without appropriate accommodations for religious attire.

"This may be the tip of the iceberg," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations. "There's got to be a way to work it out so that this security concern does not lead to violations of constitutional rights."

Shelley, 54, who runs a day care out of her home in Lexington Park, said she has used the credit union in the St. Mary's County community of California for more than 10 years. Until February, no employees had complained about her head scarf, which covers her hair but not her face. But a few weeks ago, she said, she was standing in line to deposit a check when an employee asked her to come to the back room, referring to a new policy that prohibited hats, hoods and sunglasses. She complied but asked whether she would have to go through the same process each time she made a transaction.

On Saturday, Shelley said, employees again asked her to come to the back room if she would not remove her head scarf. "No," she recalled telling them, "I want to be served like everybody else."

She left the credit union and called the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which lobbies and advocates for the Muslim community. "There was so many people there, and I was embarrassed," she said.

Tom Lyons, senior vice president for security at Navy Federal, said he was not aware of Shelley's case and could not discuss it specifically. But he defended the credit union's policy, implemented in December, saying it was designed to prevent armed robbery and identity theft. He said it would not be unreasonable for bank employees to ask customers who refused to take off their hats to move to a separate room so they could be identified.

"We want to be able to clearly identify who you are and make sure the transaction is safe," Lyons said. "This is a policy that applies to everybody in the branch. She wasn't singled out. . . . We tried to accommodate her and help her with her transaction and move on."

Lyons said that banks saw a significant increase in robberies last year, especially in the Washington area, and that many banks have instituted similar policies. Navy Federal is among the last to do so, he said. "This is not a new process. It's all over the country."

Fred Solomon, a spokesman for PNC Bank, said all branches have banned hats and other head apparel for more than a year, although the company put signs in their buildings stating as much only in the past six months. He said the reason for the ban is security. He said his tellers receive "special training on what is and isn't religious headgear" and are told not to ask those wearing religious headgear to take it off.

News reports provided by the Council on American-Islamic Relations indicate that two Muslim women in the state of California were refused service when they would not remove their scarves.
