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Baptist Press

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October 28, 1999

(99-89)

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**SBC prayer booklet on Hinduism  
prompts outrage in India, reports say**

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist prayer guide on Hinduism has prompted outrage in India, home to 800 million Hindus, according to international press reports.

The pocket prayer guide, published by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, urges Southern Baptists to pray that Hindus would be delivered from spiritual "darkness" and accept Christ during Divali, Hinduism's Festival of Lights, a major religious holiday in early November.

Indian newspapers have published excerpts from the prayer guide deemed offensive to Indians, according to Ecumenical News International.

News of the prayer guide has deeply embarrassed many of India's 23 million Christians, who are already under pressure because of violence directed against them by fundamentalist Hindus and are campaigning against a planned visit to New Delhi by Pope John Paul II, ENI reported.

The Times of India, the nation's largest English-language newspaper, published a portion of the booklet describing the city formerly known as Bombay as "a city of spiritual darkness" where "eight out of every 10 people are Hindus, slaves bound by fear and tradition to false gods."

Reuters quoted an Indian official who described the booklet as "illiterate and offensive."

"Firstly, India is more religious than any other country in the world," K.R. Malkani, spokesman for the governing Bharatiya Janata Party, said in a statement. "Morally, it is more Christian than any other Christian country. Secondly, is it not an insult to India to tell Hindus that they are all sinners and that only Jesus can save them?"

Religion News Service reported criticism of the effort also coming from Nepal, which is 90 percent Hindu. The World Hindu Federation, based in Katmandu, called the action a "farce."

In a statement dated Oct. 27, officials of the Richmond, Va., -based International Mission Board apologized for offending Hindus.

"The purpose of the Divali guide was to help Southern Baptists understand and identify with Hindu people as we express our love for them in prayer," the statement said. "The language in the prayer guide was

chosen to communicate to Southern Baptists, not Hindus, and the truths in it, as we understand them, are rooted in the Bible, the book we believe to be God's revealed word.

"It is distressing to us that elements of the guide may have offended our Hindu neighbors, and for that we are profoundly sorry. We understand that the good news of God's saving love in Jesus, the Savior, may be offensive to some, but never was it our intent to express that love in an offensive way."

The controversy comes on the heels of an earlier flap involving a previous IMB-produced prayer guide focusing on Judaism. American Jewish leaders called that booklet, coinciding with Judaism's High Holy Days, arrogant and offensive. SBC leaders defended the effort, saying the New Testament commands Christians to share their faith with all people.

In an interview with ENI, Pastor Gulkhan Pau, general secretary of the 750,000-member Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India, said he disagreed with the approach taken by Southern Baptists in the Divali prayer guide. "You preach your faith, but you don't play down others," he said.

Pau said an estimated 2 million Baptists in India do preach that Jesus is the answer to life but added: "We recognize anyone's right to worship any god. We share the love of God, and I am not going to condemn the Hindu or the Muslim for his faith."

"Those who bring out such derogatory material from outside should be more careful, as it is going to disturb our mission and put us in trouble," he said.

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## **Two churches targeted over women pastors**

By Bob Allen

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. (ABP) -- An Indiana church has dropped ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, anticipating censure by a state body for having a woman as pastor.

And in a similar dispute, a church in Savannah, Ga., has been kicked out of its local association.

University Baptist Church in Bloomington, Ind., voted Sept. 29 to withdraw from the SBC, including state-and-local affiliates, and to align instead with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group that affirms women in ministry.

The Baptist State Convention of Baptists in Indiana was poised to consider a recommendation at its Oct. 26-27 annual meeting declaring the church unscriptural.

An executive committee recommendation stopped short of removing the Bloomington church from membership but said the state convention should not accept funds or seat messengers from the congregation "until such time as the church repents of its current course and the convention votes to rescind this action."

Baptist Press reported the church's withdrawal from the state group made the motion unnecessary.

A statement announcing University Baptist's decision to withdraw said the church believes Southern Baptist leaders have "increasingly guided the convention to espouse doctrinal conformity" over the SBC's primary mission.

The action follows a dispute with the state convention and Metropolitan Baptist Association over the church's decision to call a woman as senior pastor. Annette Hill-Briggs, an ordained Southern Baptist woman, first came to the congregation as associate pastor in 1992. She served one year as interim pastor before being nominated and elected unanimously as senior pastor in 1998.

Church leaders said opposition from the association and state convention violated the local church's autonomy as described in the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Opponents of the church countered that the state convention also is autonomous and has the right not to accept churches that violate Scripture. Most Indiana Southern Baptists believe the Bible teaches that only men qualify as senior pastors, they said.

"I regret that the University Baptist Church has chosen to retreat instead of repent," said state convention president Woody Cumbie. "Still, I applaud their integrity," he told the Indiana Baptist newspaper. "If they are going to intentionally step outside of the historic doctrine and practice of our convention, then the right thing for them to do is leave."

In a similar dispute in Georgia, Savannah Baptist Association voted 181-96 to dismiss Memorial Baptist Church Sept. 21 for "practices contrary to the association" in calling a woman as pastor. The association's executive committee earlier voted 65-46 recommending ouster.

Pastor Carolyn Hale, who moved to the church July 6 from Kentucky, said whether the Bible permits female pastors is a matter of interpretation. She said her approach to the Bible is to interpret it in light of the culture and times in which it was written and then to ask God for guidance in applying its message to today. Another approach used by some is literalism.

"If you've got different premises to start with, you're going to come up with different interpretations," she said.

Many Baptists who take the Bible literally infer from a passage that a pastor should be the "husband of one wife," that the office is limited to males. Other texts say women should not be placed in authority over males.

But Hale said if contemporary Christians want to interpret the Bible literally, they should condone slavery and women ought to cover their heads in church.

Hale said the church remains in good standing with the Georgia Baptist Convention.

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## **Influence of the Religious Right a question in 2000 presidential race**

By Mark Wingfield

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- A founder of the Religious Right, Ed McAteer says he's convinced voters will endorse the movement's conservative political agenda in record numbers and help elect a new president next year.

Randall Balmer, a sociologist who has studied the influence of religious conservatives in American politics for years, says the Religious Right is dead.

Who is right will likely become a major question in the next 12 months. Do conservative evangelicals still have the clout to swing the 2000 presidential election as they are credited with doing in 1980, 1984 and 1988?

McAteer, a retired marketing manager from Memphis, Tenn., founded the Religious Roundtable. He organized the 1980 National Affairs Briefing in Dallas where Ronald Reagan offered the now-famous pledge to the Religious Right: "I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you."

Pundits credit the event with cementing the relationship between the Republican Party and conservative-evangelical voters and ensuring Reagan's defeat of Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher.

Those heady days led to formation of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and later Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition.

While the Moral Majority has since dissolved and observers say the Christian Coalition is in disarray, McAteer says grass-roots support for the Religious Right is stronger than ever. He's planning a National Affairs Briefing for next August or September, inviting the nominees of all political parties. The 2000 event will be held either in Dallas, San Antonio, Atlanta, Memphis or Nashville, he says.

"The interest level of people in the presidential race is much higher today than it was at any time, including 1980 when Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter ran," McAteer, a member of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, said in an interview.

On a scale of one to 10, McAteer said if the interest level of "social conservatives, Bible-believing Christians, the Christian right or whatever you want to call them" was a three in 1979, it's somewhere between seven and eight today.

But Balmer, a sociology professor and author specializing in religious politics, said he doesn't see it.

"The Religious Right may have been born during the administration of a Democratic Southern Baptist president and may be dying during the administration of a Democratic Southern Baptist president," observed Balmer, who teaches at Columbia University in New York.

Balmer points to the recent comments of former Religious Right champions Cal Thomas, Ed Dobson and Paul Weyrich "who are saying, in effect, the game's over and we lost and we had better tend to our knitting at home."

Within the last year, Thomas and Dobson released a much-discussed book in which they contend the conservative-evangelical political movement went about things the wrong way and failed to effect significant change. Weyrich, a key Republican strategist, has said Christians should retreat from politics to focus on prayer, evangelism and ministry.

Balmer's view is shared by Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. Parham is a frequent critic of growing ties between leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and the right wing of the Republican Party.

"Much of the Religious Right now sounds the bugle of retreat instead of the trumpet of takeover," Parham said. "As the movement evacuates the political field, some Religious Right leaders seek public pity with claims they are being persecuted and martyred. Others turn up the rhetorical voltage, despite organizational debt, the departure of seasoned leaders and admissions that organizational strength has been grossly overstated."

Parham noted that the Christian Coalition, which this year lost its fight to gain tax-exempt status, has experienced a round of high-level staff departures, has been accused of inflating membership figures and has financial difficulties, including a reported deficit of \$2 million or more.

Don't believe everything you hear, countered Chuck Anderson, director of the Texas Christian Coalition, based in Bedford, Texas.

His response to what is being written about the demise of the Christian Coalition is the famous quote attributed to Mark Twain: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

"Our organization is still alive at the grassroots and moving ahead," Anderson said. The coalition's national office may have experienced a "hiccup," he admitted, but "they're OK now."

"The Christian Coalition and conservative Christian voters will have a tremendous impact on the presidential election this year," Anderson predicted. "Even the Democratic candidates -- Al Gore in particular -- are talking about our issues."

Anderson said the fact remains that "evangelical Christians, along with pro-family Roman Catholics, make up the single-largest voting bloc in the country."

Yet even Anderson admits it's unlikely that voting bloc will become a unified force in a presidential election. "One-third or more of that voting bloc voted for Bill Clinton," he explained.

But McAteer said that illustrates the difference between Reagan and George Bush, who lost to Clinton in 1992. While the hard-core Religious Right opposed Clinton, it did not translate into support for Bush. Clinton won 38 percent of the evangelical vote in the race against Bush. By comparison, Reagan sewed up 82 percent of the evangelical vote, he said.

McAteer said the Reagan success story could be repeated, "if the right person gets out there and can articulate" the right vision. "In my opinion, that person could get 85 percent of the evangelical vote," he said.

For many conservatives, however, the likely Republican nominee, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, is not that kind of candidate.

Bush has courted religious conservatives but has been short on specific pledges about the Religious Right's social agenda. He also has alienated some of right's heroes in Congress by accusing them of attempting to balance the federal budget on the backs of the poor.

Democrats take glee in the dilemma Bush may create for conservative evangelicals, while Religious Right leaders play down the problem.

"It's not that Gov. Bush is by any means turning away from those social issues," said Anderson, head of the Texas Christian Coalition. "He's just not necessarily highlighting those issues in his presentations. It's like the Apostle Paul, who said, 'When I'm with the Greeks, I talk like the Greeks.'"

Many religious conservatives believe Bush will ultimately support their social agenda in office, even if he won't say so while campaigning, Anderson said. He noted, however, that members of the Christian Coalition are backing a variety of presidential candidates and the coalition itself won't endorse anyone.

Coalition founder Pat Robertson came close to endorsing Bush, however, during a "Road to Victory" rally in Washington in September. During introductions at the rally, Robertson fawned over Bush, noting he would be "a very acceptable candidate."

McAteer said he wishes Republican contender Gary Bauer could get a better hearing from the American public, but he concedes that Bush will be the nominee because the Republican Party apparatus is behind him.

Bush is saying the right things and is a "decent person," McAteer said. But Bauer "speaks with a conviction that is very real. It's not just to tickle your ears. He believes deeply in these issues."

Nevertheless, a large number of Reagan evangelicals will line up behind Bush next November because they see him as their best hope, McAteer predicted. "What I'm hearing is a general discontent. People are saying, 'We don't believe he's a Ronald Reagan; he's not a Gary Bauer; but he is so much better than what we have.'"

McAteer said he has heard people use the expression, "I'll hold my nose and vote."

But observers like Balmer and Parham say conservative activists are merely looking at the glass as half full.

Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, signed on with Bush because Reed is a "consummate pragmatist," Balmer said. "And the cynic in me says Robertson is willing to sacrifice principle for power."

Parham said he sees fault lines in the conservative-evangelical voting bloc for both now and the future.

"The center cannot hold," he said. "The movement will fragment into three camps. Part of the Religious Right will withdraw even more deeply into a culture of biblical fundamentalism and American free enterprise with Christian schools, Christian businesses and Christian radio stations. A second part will accommodate in order to win another presidential election. A third group will privatize and spiritualize faith, much like some evangelicals did in earlier days in the 20th century."

Balmer echoed Parham's last point. "Evangelicals are returning to the kind of privatization of morality they practiced prior to Jimmy Carter's administration," he said. "And maybe that's not all bad."

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## **Church-state scholar, attorney general debate of posting Ten Commandments**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Alabama's attorney general and a Baptist church-state specialist squared off in a recent debate over whether the First Amendment prohibits displaying the Ten Commandments in a courthouse?

It's more than a rhetorical question, thanks to a real-life drama that has played out recently in the Alabama courtroom of Circuit Judge Roy Moore, a Southern Baptist whose display of the Commandments sparked a national debate and two legal battles.

The debate came recently to Baylor University in Waco, Texas, at a luncheon forum sponsored by the Dallas chapter of the Federalist Society, a national organization of politically conservative attorneys.

Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor, who was appointed to the post in 1997 by Gov. Fob James and then elected to a full term in 1998, said he sees nothing in the First Amendment to prohibit posting the Commandments in a courthouse. He has been an ardent defender of Judge Moore.

To make his case, Pryor described the interior of three courtrooms he has visited in the United States.

The first features "huge murals," one of Jesus Christ preaching the Beatitudes with an inscription of Scripture beneath. Above the bench in this courtroom, he said, stands a mural depicting Moses giving the Ten Commandments.

The second courtroom opens through wooden doors engraved with tablets bearing the Roman numerals 1-10. The inside features a mural of ancient lawgivers, including Moses, and dozens of other engravings of tablets like those bearing the Ten Commandments.

The third courtroom has no symbols on its doors or murals on its walls. But it features portraits of American heroes such as Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence and the Mayflower Compact, a seal of the state and a "small wooden plaque" bearing the Ten Commandments.

Then Pryor revealed the identities of the courtrooms he had described. The first is in the old state capitol building in Pennsylvania, one of the nation's oldest courtrooms. The second is the United States Supreme Court. The third is the courtroom of Judge Moore in Etowah County, Ala.

"Why is it that Judge Moore's display, rather than the other displays, has been targeted for prosecution?" Pryor asked. The answer, he suggested, is because Judge Moore is "a controversial figure -- a Vietnam veteran, a West Point graduate and a Southern Baptist of very strong opinion."

Judge Moore's real problem may be that he "actually believes the Ten Commandments," Pryor said.

The debate over posting the Commandments in a courthouse differs from debates over school prayer or erecting a cross on public property, he declared, because it does not involve coercion of impressionable students and does not involve a symbol that is sacred to only one religion.

"The Ten Commandments are recognized not just by Christians but by all of the world's three great religions," he said.

Even so, the First Amendment "does not prohibit our government from acknowledging God or our Judeo-Christian heritage," Pryor said.

Judeo-Christian beliefs are the "basis of this republic," he said, suggesting that if it is unconstitutional to hang the Ten Commandments in a courtroom it ought to be equally illegal to hang the Declaration of Independence because of its acknowledgment of God.

Derek Davis, director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor, took the opposing view.

The question of whether to post the Commandments in a courtroom is "not a difficult one at all," Davis said. "Those who want to post them should not, and those who have them up should take them down."

Davis said that even James Madison -- whom the Federalist Society features on its literature -- would agree were he alive today.

"What drives the desire to post the Ten Commandments is a sense that we are in a moral decline in our country," Davis asserted. "The answer for many is an infusion of religion."

That's only a problem, he said, when government becomes the agent to infuse religion.

He cited six problems with posting the Commandments in a courtroom:

-- Which version will be posted? "Protestant, Catholic and Jewish versions are all different," he said, noting variances in wording and order. Since each tradition considers its own version sacred, Davis asked, whom will government choose to offend?

-- Allowing such a display violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law regarding an establishment of religion ..."), Davis said. Regardless of a judge's personal convictions, he or she is a public servant who acts as an agent of the government and therefore should avoid any appearance of favoring one religion over another, he added.

-- Those who claim that prohibiting judges from posting the Ten Commandments violates their right to free expression of religion are mistaken, Davis said. "Asking individual officers to uphold the Constitution is not the same as asking officers to surrender their rights to free expression."

-- Displaying the Commandments is a "subtle suggestion" to jurors "that only those who affirm the Judeo-Christian tradition are worthy to render judgment," he said. This is wrong, he added, because "religious faith is not a requirement for participation in the judicial process."

-- Courts have ruled against posting the Ten Commandments in public-school classrooms, and public courtrooms should be no different, Davis said.

-- Government endorsement of sacred texts waters down religious faith and leads to a "trivialization of faith," he said. "It is a sacrilege to argue that the Ten Commandments should be posted in a courtroom because it is a secular document. ... Government has no business promoting the merits of a sacred text like the Ten Commandments."

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