

10 Ways Right-Wing Christian Groups Will Likely Shove Religion Down Your Throat This Year

A surging religious right means daunting challenges for keeping Church and State separate.

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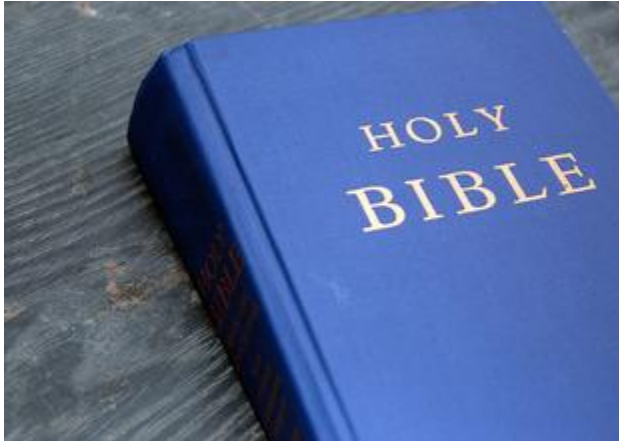


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You don't have to look far or wide to see signs that the Religious Right was resurgent in 2011.

From the halls of Congress, where the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly urged public schools to post "In God We Trust" displays in classrooms, to the Values Voter Summit in Washington, D.C., that was attended by 3,000 fundamentalist Christian activists, the Religious Right's influence loomed large.

Since 2012 is an election year, we expect the Religious Right to use this growing influence to wage an all-out war to shape the U.S. government into a body that will do its bidding.

With that in mind, here are 10 of the biggest challenges, issues and concerns that Americans United expects to confront in the coming twelve months.

Improper Involvement of Religion in the 2012 Elections

Religion has infiltrated the run-up to the 2012 elections on an unprecedented level. Virtually all of the Republican presidential candidates have spent considerable time courting votes from the Religious Right. Nearly all of the major contenders spoke at the Values Voter Summit, and most of those candidates also appeared at a forum in November focusing on “questions of the soul” that was held at a fundamentalist church in Iowa.

The Religious Right is also making a serious push to pick the Republican candidate for president. The Alliance Defense Fund held its annual “Pulpit Freedom Sunday” in October, an event designed to encourage churches to engage in illegal campaign intervention. Last year’s version featured a record number of participants, and activists assume that even more will join in fray in 2012. The Religious Right is also planning to hold voter turnout drives and distribute “voter guides” that pretend to be unbiased but are not.

Religious Right strategists dream of forging fundamentalist and evangelical churches into a disciplined voting bloc to effectively dominate the democratic process.

Sadly, the presidential campaign has already included expressions of religious bigotry. Influential Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress said in October that former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who is Mormon, is a member of a cult and cited his affiliation as a reason not to support his candidacy.

Critics have also questioned President Barack Obama’s status as a Christian, charging falsely that he is a Muslim or at best an opponent of the Christian faith.

Article VI of the U.S. Constitution forbids religious tests for public office, and church-state separationists regard attacks such as these as a violation of the spirit of that provision.

School Voucher Onslaught in the States and Congress

The Associated Press reported that 30 states explored voucher subsidies for religious and other private schools in 2011, and that number is expected to grow this year. These efforts have been driven by wealthy right-wing organizations, such as the Alliance for School Choice, which advocates for vouchers nationwide and is run by right-wing activist Betsy DeVos. Her organization and its allies provide vast resources and public relations expertise to push for school vouchers in many states.

DeVos has lots of help from the Religious Right and the Roman Catholic hierarchy because parochial schools and fundamentalist academies would be the primary beneficiary of “school choice” programs.

There is an especially sneaky attempt at voucher legislation underway in Florida, where a ballot initiative set to be considered in 2012 would allow the state to give taxpayer money to religious organizations.

Rabbi Merrill Shapiro, president of the Americans United Board of Trustees, is a plaintiff in a case filed by AU and its allies to get the initiative off the ballot. He and others involved in the litigation say the proposed constitutional amendment misleads voters about its true effects.

Voucher bills may come up on the federal level as well. House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) railroaded a voucher program for the District of Columbia through Congress in March, so it’s clear Americans United will have to carefully monitor federal legislation as well in 2012.

The Catholic Bishops’ Crusade for ‘Religious Liberty’

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has launched a formidable new lobbying unit known as the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty. The committee claims to be defending religious liberty, but critics say it actually seeks to preserve taxpayer funding for church-affiliated agencies while maintaining overly broad exemptions from various laws.

A representative of this committee testified in October before the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution regarding the issue of religious liberty in America and made the case that Catholic-run organizations should be exempt from providing birth control or recognizing same-sex marriages but should still receive government contracts and funds. Republicans on the committee seemed willing to consider this position, but Democrats were very resistant to offering such broad religious exemptions and government money.

The Pew Research Center found that Catholic lobbying organizations are the most powerful among Washington religious lobbies as they comprise 19 percent of all faith lobbying. As a result, the Ad Hoc Committee will certainly be one to watch in 2012.

Improper Religious Proselytizing in Public Schools

Some elements of the Religious Right hate the public school system because it doesn’t allow them to indoctrinate students with their version of Christianity. As a result, they look to add prayer or other religious activities to the school schedule whenever they can.

In Missouri, for example, voters will face a religion amendment on the 2012 ballot that, if passed, would open the door for religious activities on any and all public property, including schools. The proposal is so open-ended that school children might have the right to refuse to do homework on religious grounds.

In Florida, a bill is advancing through the state legislature that would let local school boards allow students to offer prayers at school events. Originally the measure stated that the prayers must be non-sectarian but that language was removed. The legislation has been offered several times before and could pass, although AU's Florida chapters, the ACLU and the Anti-Defamation League all oppose the measure.

Moreover, the Religious Right is always trying to stack public school curriculum and textbooks with religious material and going on creationism crusades, which observers expect will continue in 2012.

'Faith-Based' Funding and Hiring Bias

Despite pleas from Americans United and allies, President Obama has yet to act on his campaign promise to make major civil rights and civil liberties improvements to the Bush "faith-based" initiative. Speaking in Zanesville, Ohio, in 2008, he said, "If you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can't discriminate against them – or against the people you hire – on the basis of their religion."

Americans United has written to Obama asking him to keep his promise, but he has yet to do so. This issue is likely to remain an ongoing concern in 2012.

Related faith-based funding controversies are also likely. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is considering a new rule allowing the use of taxpayer funds for the construction and repair of religious buildings overseas.

AU has submitted comments to USAID urging the agency to withdraw the proposed rule.

Government Promotion of Religious Symbols

In an election year, politicians often look for easy ways to show their religiosity and that has already begun at both the state and federal levels.

The U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a resolution in November that reaffirmed "In God We Trust" as the official motto of the United States and encouraged its display in public schools and

other public buildings. The action came even though, as Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) pointed out, no one had suggested that this is not the motto of the United States.

That same month, Rep. Bill Johnson (R-Ohio), introduced a bill that would order the Secretary of the Interior to add a Franklin Delano Roosevelt prayer to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Roosevelt offered that prayer on D-Day as the United States began the military operation that liberated Europe.

Another religious display issue has arisen in Montana, where a large statue of Jesus erected by the Knights of Columbus sits on national forest land. The U.S. Forest Service had planned to remove the statue, but is facing resistance not only from the Knights but also from U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.), who wants to save it.

In Georgia, the state legislature will consider a bill that would require all vehicle license plates to be emblazoned with "In God We Trust" unless drivers pay extra to cover up the message.

As election season heats up this year, it is likely these types of efforts will only increase.

Attacks on Religious Minorities

The Religious Right says frequently that America is a Christian nation (despite ample evidence to the contrary), so anyone who doesn't share that movement's belief in its special brand of Christianity is often marginalized.

The best example of attempts by the Religious Right to marginalize minorities is anti-sharia legislation. In 2010, Oklahoma passed the so-called "Save Our State Amendment," which bars enforcement of Islamic law. It received 70 percent of the vote.

Church-state experts note that the U.S. Constitution already bars government support for religion in most cases, so such legislation is unnecessary.

The law has been challenged in court on the grounds that it singles out Muslims for discrimination. Americans United filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case in May, and it is now before the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

While Oklahoma has taken one of the rashest stances in discriminating against Muslims, it is clear that many other elements of the Religious Right would like to see similar laws enforced nationwide and could make a push for that in 2012.

The Marriage War

The Religious Right, along with the Catholic hierarchy and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), are out to fashion state marriage policy so it reflects their doctrinal teachings. They are firmly committed to the idea that marriage is between one man and one woman only, and they are fighting in the courts, in the statehouses and in Congress to make sure the law continues to define marriage according to their theology.

The highest profile case is the challenge to California's 2008 ban on same-sex marriage that is working its way through the federal court system. More than 40 states have already banned same-sex marriage, but the outcome of this case could set a precedent for reversing that trend. The Supreme Court may take up the issue in 2012.

There is also a referendum in the works in North Carolina that could be on the ballot in May and would, if passed, put a ban on gay marriage into the state constitution.

A referendum banning same-sex marriage is also on the November ballot in Minnesota.

'Personhood' Amendments Here, There and Everywhere

Multiple states have faced attacks from groups seeking to pass "personhood" amendments, and that trend looks to continue in 2012.

The latest state to consider one of these amendments is Mississippi, which voted it down in November. Had the measure passed, it would have declared fertilized eggs to be people, made abortion illegal in virtually all instances, including cases of rape and incest, and it would have banned some forms of birth control. So broad was the language of the amendment that women who miscarried could have been subjected to criminal investigations.

Keith Mason, co-founder of Personhood USA, which is a sponsor of these amendments, has said that his organization may attempt another shot at a Mississippi ballot initiative and that his organization is pushing for "personhood" amendments on the 2012 ballots in Ohio, Florida, Montana, Oregon, California and Nevada.

Religiously Based Censorship

The Religious Right is always on the lookout for books, movies, artwork and other aspects of culture to ban based on their religious convictions.

In late 2010, Speaker John Boehner and his allies called for the removal of an exhibit in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery after they learned that it contains a short video of a crucifix with ants crawling on it, as well as works of art with sexual themes. The museum bent to Boehner's pressure and removed the video.

In Missouri last summer, a school district banned Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Sarah Oeckler's *Twenty Boy Summer* because a local professor complained that the books advocate principles that are contrary to the Bible.

Similar Religious Right ventures are likely in 2012.