Experimenting with Religious Liberty The Quasi-Constitutional Status of Religious Exemptions

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CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This article deals with an episode of constitutional development in
which the voice of the people, rather than that of the Supreme Court,
has been dominant. The constitutional value at issue is religion—its
free exercise and its establishment. The Court has taken a step back in
developing this constitutional value. Under Establishment Clause ju-
risprudence, despite fairly extensive doctrinal development, the Su-
preme Court has recently refrained from hearing some cases that it
might have heard in the past, under the rubric of nonjusticiability.2
Much more dramatically, the Court limited the substantive reach of
the Free Exercise Clause in 1990, in Employment Division v. Smith,3 leav-
ing religious believers to seek relief elsewhere from laws deemed offen-
sive to religious values.

This article is not primarily about those actions, and lack of ac-
tion, by the Court. Instead, my focus is on the reaction to the Court’s
withdrawal. Since the reaction to Smith has been more developed, in
terms of promoting religious exemptions to neutral, generally applica-
able laws, I will devote my attention here to Smith and its aftermath. I

1 Professor of Law, Duquesne University School of Law. This paper was prepared
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comments.

challengers to tuition tax credit lack standing); Hein v. Freedom From Religion Found.,

will discuss the Establishment Clause only in passing, to provide a fuller constitutional setting of religion in American life.

Parts I, II, and III of the article are mostly descriptive: discussing the withdrawal of the Court in *Smith*, the reactions thereto, and some of the current debates and issues. I see the *Smith* decision not so much as a change in constitutional doctrine, but as a pragmatic admission by the Justices that, given the reality of diverse and rapidly changing religious commitments and demands in America, they simply were unable to forge a workable constitutional approach to the issue of religious exemptions.4

For much the same reasons that the Court could not resolve the religion issue, the reactions to *Smith*, including federal legislation, state legislation, state constitutional amendments, state court litigation under state constitution Free Exercise provisions, and general political debate, have also, so far, failed to produce a national consensus on the proper role and scope of religious exemptions from generally applicable laws.5 But that may be changing. A temporary equilibrium could be reached.

We see in the current issues and controversies around religious exemptions, particularly those arising under the recently upheld6 Pa-

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4 This view is not so different from that of Donald Beschle, who sees *Smith* as a judicial reaction to the expansion of the definition of religion that in turn rendered strict scrutiny protections of religious practice “wildly impractical.” Donald L. Beschle, *Does a Broad Free Exercise Right Require a Narrow Definition of “Religion”?*, 39 Hastings Const. L.Q. 357 (2012).

5 One line of development I have omitted that might also fit here is the requirement of reasonable religious employment accommodation under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. See generally Kiran Preet Dhillon, *Covering Turbans and Beards: Title VII’s Role in Legitimating Religious Discrimination Against Sikhs*, 21 S. Cal. Interdisc. L.J. 213 (2011). Undoubtedly the issues the courts are struggling with in that context are similar to those discussed in this article. See Davinder S. Sidhu, *Out of Sight, Out of Legal Recourse: Interpreting and Revising Title VII to Prohibit Workplace Segregation Based on Religion*, 36 N.Y.U. Rev. L. & Soc. Change, 103, 138-41 (2012) (discussing and critiquing the reasoning of *Smith* in the context of Title VII analysis). I leave them out because, aside from their large, separate scope, they generally represent accommodations required of private parties rather than exemptions by government and thus are not usually of constitutional dimension. It is true that our society does sometimes enshrine constitutional values by statute in the employment context, as is true of race discrimination, for example. But, as the value of procedural due process illustrates, we do not always do so. Whether and to what extent Title VII cases come to exemplify the quasi-constitutional value that is being debated around *Smith* should be explored separately.

tient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), a society trying to resolve the tension between properly protecting religious conscience on the one hand, and the needs of a religiously diverse and increasingly secularly-oriented culture on the other. Of course, a religious person might say that my description constitutes a secular analysis of what the religion controversy is really about. Such a person might insist that the problem is an increasingly expansive secular government intruding on the religious sphere.

Part IV of the article is evaluative, asking what is the meaning of Smith and the resulting popular debate over religious exemptions? Many participants in this controversy believe they are debating a constitutional issue; they do not see themselves as merely engaging in the promotion of political preferences. Therefore, the various reactions to Smith are a form of popular constitutional development, which I call in the title of this article, experimenting with religious liberty. That popular engagement raises questions about the proper contours of constitutional interpretation. America does not usually develop its constitutional norms entirely, or even largely, outside the courts, especially when the courts had previously been very much involved in a constitutional field. Courts are often seen as countermajoritarian entities in the service of constitutional protections of minorities. But how is that to happen when the public is so dominant in the unfolding of constitutional meaning? In other words, how can religion be properly protected from majoritarian oppression when it is the public that is working out the protections? There are similarities here, and important differences, both to theories of popular constitutionalism and to the historical developments of other constitutional values, such as free speech, gun rights, and economic liberty.

Part V is predictive. Out of the ferment that is occurring over religious exemptions, what constitutional, or quasi-constitutional, norm is likely to emerge? The role of religion in American public life is being debated in a no-holds-barred fashion, at a very fundamental level. In recent years, America has become both more assertively religious—and specifically more assertively Christian—and more assertively

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8 This would be the case with the law professors involved in the debates discussed in Part III infra, such as Richard Garnett, Douglas Laycock, and others.
secular. This causes us to ask Ronald Dworkin’s foundational question: are we going to be a basically religious nation or a basically secular nation? Religious exemptions are one way America is trying to answer that question.

The final section—Part VI—is my attempt to try to alter this debate. I will sketch out, at least preliminarily, an alternative framework that might lessen the divisiveness of the debate over religious exemptions. I ask a question quite different from Dworkin’s question: why do we assume that there are different realms of belief and nonbelief, when many believers and nonbelievers share fundamental commitments with regard to the meaning of life and the nature of reality? The supernatural aspect of religion—an important aspect to be sure, but not the only characteristic of religion—has been allowed to dominate discourse in the field of religious exemptions. Persons traditionally regarded as believers and nonbelievers tend to differ over the existence of a certain kind of God and of the nature of the supernatural. But in a universe in which subatomic particles seem to know we are looking at them and seem to share a connection with fellow particles at impossible distances, who can say just what the supernatural is? The reality of the supernatural is not a proper basis for distinguishing those who are religious from those who are not. Once that insight is accepted, the divisiveness of the controversy over religious exemptions might be lessened.

I. The Supreme CourtWithdraws in Employment Division v. Smith

Smith was an unemployment compensation case that became a general test of the constitutionality of the criminalization of conduct that is religiously motivated. Two drug and alcohol abuse rehabilitation counselors were discharged after they ingested a small quantity of peyote during a religious ceremony. They applied for, and were denied, unemployment compensation benefits by the Employment Divi-

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9 See, for example, the op-ed written by David Niose, author of Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans, in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on July 15, 2012: Rise of the Secularists. The subtitle of the op-ed was, “They’re fighting back against the overbearing influence of religious conservatives.” Id. at B-1. This is an example of both the growing assertion of religion and the growing assertion of secularism.
10 RONALD DWORIN, IS DEMOCRACY POSSIBLE HERE? PRINCIPLES FOR A NEW POLITICAL DEBATE 56 (2006).
12 Id. at 874.
13 Id.
sion of the Oregon Department of Human Resources on the ground that they had been discharged for work-related misconduct. The Oregon Court of Appeals reversed, and the Oregon Supreme Court affirmed, holding that denying unemployment compensation benefits because of religiously motivated conduct would violate the Free Exercise Clause of the federal Constitution under *Sherbert v. Verner* and *Thomas v. Review Board.*

In the first round, *Smith I,* the United States Supreme Court vacated this judgment on the ground that the illegality of the employees’ conduct—a factor the Oregon Supreme Court had not considered relevant to the Free Exercise claim since, under State law, the misconduct provision was unrelated to the enforcement of the State’s drug laws—was relevant to the federal constitutional analysis. Justice Stevens’s majority opinion did not actually decide whether a person could be denied unemployment benefits for engaging in criminal conduct. The opinion merely noted that the conduct that gave rise to termination of employment in *Sherbert* and *Thomas* had been “perfectly legal” and that the results in those cases, and the result as well in *Hobbie v. Unemployment Appeal Commission of Florida,* “might well have been different if the employees had been discharged for engaging in criminal conduct.” Despite formally leaving the matter open, there was not much doubt that Justice Stevens thought that the commission of criminal conduct would usually justify denial of unemployment compensation despite sincere religious motivation.

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14 Id.
16 Id. at 450-51. This was held as a matter of state law rather than as an aspect of Free Exercise analysis. The state court cited only state sources to suggest that the unemployment compensation system was not enforcing, and was not supposed to enforce, the state’s criminal law.
18 See id.
20 *Smith I,* 485 U.S. at 671. The claimants in *Sherbert,* *Thomas,* and *Hobbie* had been denied unemployment compensation benefits, which was held to be a violation of the Free Exercise Clause.
21 Id. (citing *Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1879)*) (“We have held that bigamy may be forbidden, even when the practice is dictated by sincere religious convictions. If a bigamist may be sent to jail despite the religious motivation for his misconduct, surely a State may refuse to pay unemployment compensation to a mar-
On remand, the Oregon Supreme Court held that the religiously motivated use of peyote was prohibited by Oregon law, but that this criminal prohibition was itself a violation of the federal Constitution’s Free Exercise Clause. It was this judgment about the effect of the Free Exercise Clause that the Supreme Court reviewed in *Smith II*. In this circuitous fashion, a case about unemployment compensation benefits in which no criminal law enforcement had taken place, or been threatened, became a case about the constitutional status of religious exemptions from criminal laws.

Justice Scalia’s majority opinion in *Smith II* became one of the most controversial decisions in recent Supreme Court history, not because he upheld a criminal prohibition against a claim of religious exemption—most asserted religious exemptions claims had previously failed in the Supreme Court—but because he held, in effect, that the Free Exercise Clause does not apply at all when criminal prohibitions not aimed at religious practice forbid what religion obliges or oblige what religion forbids.

Justice Scalia distinguished among three kinds of claims that might be brought under the Free Exercise Clause. The core meaning of the constitutional value is the “right to believe and profess whatever religious doctrine one desires.” Beyond the profession of belief, Justice Scalia conceded that “the performance of (or abstention from) physical acts” would also be protected by the Free Exercise Clause if prohibited only when religiously motivated or on account of the particular religious belief that they display.

The third type of religious exemption claim, which Justice Scalia characterized as “one large step further,” is aimed at a criminal law concededly not directed against religious practice and concededly valid as applied to those not religiously motivated to violate it. He

\[\text{\footnotesize}\begin{align*}
\text{\footnotesize22} & \text{ \textit{Smith II}, 494 U.S. 872, 875 (1990).} \\
\text{\footnotesize23} & \text{ \textit{Id.} at 874.} \\
\text{\footnotesize24} & \text{ \textit{Id.}} \\
\text{\footnotesize25} & \text{ See \textit{id.} at 904-13 (Blackmun, J., dissenting).} \\
\text{\footnotesize26} & \text{ See \textit{id.} at 878-79 (majority opinion).} \\
\text{\footnotesize27} & \text{ See \textit{id.} at 877-78.} \\
\text{\footnotesize28} & \text{ \textit{Id.} at 877.} \\
\text{\footnotesize29} & \text{ \textit{Id.}} \\
\text{\footnotesize30} & \text{ \textit{Id.} at 878.}
\end{align*}\]
called such a criminal prohibition “a generally applicable law.” Justice Scalia denied that the text of the Free Exercise provision—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”—must be given that meaning.

This was an odd formulation, since it is probably never true that any text must be given any particular meaning.

What was odder still is that Justice Scalia determined whether the Free Exercise Clause protected religious claimants from the demands of neutral, generally applicable laws based not on the public meaning of the words of the Free Exercise Clause at the time of their adoption—Justice Scalia’s usual vaunted textualism approach—but on prior case law: “We have never held that an individual’s religious beliefs excuse him from compliance with an otherwise valid law prohibiting conduct that the State is free to regulate.”

Marci Hamilton has criticized the prevailing view that Smith represented “a dramatic, unjustified departure from previous free exercise cases.” She may be right that the decision was not unjustified, but, despite Justice Scalia’s claim, Smith II was a dramatic departure from prior case law in two senses. First, as Justice Scalia conceded, there had in fact been cases in which religiously motivated persons were excused from compliance with generally applicable laws—most notably Wisconsin v. Yoder, which invalidated a compulsory school attendance law as applied to a religious group. These cases were distinguished by Justice Scalia as involving not Free Exercise alone, but Free Exercise combined with some other right—the rights of parents in Yoder, for example—in what Justice Scalia called a “hybrid situation.”

This distinction was accurate, but its significance was not obvious. Did it mean that the Free Exercise Clause had been irrelevant in Yoder? That could hardly be the case since parental whim would certainly not justify avoiding a compulsory school attendance law. Obviously the parent had to have been relying on a constitutionally protected value.

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31 Id.
32 Id. at 877.
33 Id. at 878.
37 Smith II, 494 U.S. at 882.
But if free exercise of religion was thus at issue in *Yoder*, there is no general rule that a Free Exercise claim can never overcome a neutral, generally applicable law.

The other sense in which *Smith II* represented a departure from prior case law was its failure to require any showing by the State of a heightened interest to justify the rejection of a religious liberty claim.\(^{38}\) This omission of government justification was a critical departure. For example, in *United States v. Lee*, which Justice Scalia invoked as justifying the result in *Smith II*, Chief Justice Burger held for the Court that a religious objection to the collection and payment of Social Security taxes did not justify the imposition of a constitutionally mandated religious exemption.\(^{39}\) To that extent, *Lee* was consistent with *Smith II*.\(^{40}\)

But, in reaching that outcome, Chief Justice Burger stated the rule of religious exemption as follows:

> The conclusion that there is a conflict between the Amish faith and the obligations imposed by the social security system is only the beginning, however, and not the end of the inquiry. Not all burdens on religion are unconstitutional. The state may justify a limitation on religious liberty by showing that it is essential to accomplish an overriding governmental interest.\(^{41}\)

Whatever the meaning and strength of this test, Justice Scalia did not apply it in *Smith II*.\(^{42}\) After *Smith II*, the government would need no special justification at all to overcome a sincere religious objection to a neutral, generally applicable law.\(^{43}\)

Justice Scalia justified this outcome by pointing out that, although the Court had been purporting to apply a compelling interest test in Free Exercise cases, outside the unemployment compensation context, “we have always found the test satisfied” and in some recent cases had not been applying the test at all.\(^{44}\) Nor could the test really be applied.

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\(^{38}\) *Id.* at 894-95 (O’Connor, J., concurring).


\(^{40}\) *Smith II*, 494 U.S. at 880.

\(^{41}\) *Lee*, 455 U.S. at 257 (citations omitted).

\(^{42}\) See *Smith II*, 494 U.S. at 884-85 (stating that the *Sherbert* test, applied in *Lee*, is inapplicable to the situation in *Smith II*).

\(^{43}\) Christopher C. Lund, *Religious Liberty After Gonzales: A Look at State RFRAS*, 55 S.D. L. Rev. 466, 470 (2010) [hereinafter Lund, *State RFRAS*] (“Smith changed all that. It said that burdens on religion no longer needed any justification, as long as the laws in question were neutral and generally applicable. . . . After Smith, the government has the right to treat religious people unreasonably.”).

\(^{44}\) *Smith II*, 494 U.S. at 883.
To require a compelling government interest every time a generally applicable law, especially a general criminal law prohibition, came into conflict with religious conscience would invite the religious believer “to become a law unto himself.” And if the test really means what it says, and what it has meant in other constitutional contexts, “many laws will not meet the test.” Such a situation would be “courting anarchy” in any society, but this is especially so in our society, given our enormous religious diversity and deep commitment to religious liberty.

What is oddest of all about this result is that, having concluded that the most searching constitutional test cannot be used to protect sincere claims of religious conscience, Justice Scalia did not apply a lesser test or any test at all. Despite the presence of the Free Exercise Clause in the Constitution, which Justice Scalia admitted could textually justify the application of strict scrutiny to claims of religious liberty against neutral, generally applicable laws, Justice Scalia granted to the religious believer no protection whatsoever.

The outcome in *Smith II* seems to be a strange devolution—like the 1939 pop standard, *All or Nothing At All*. Just because religious liberty cannot be granted full constitutional protection—for what were pragmatic reasons really—would it not be better to grant it some lesser level of protection rather than none at all? Even if government officials had to justify intrusions on religious liberty merely by giving good reasons, religious liberty would remain an interest “on the table” during the passage of laws. In negotiations over public policy, such required consultation provisions are not unusual and are usually considered important. That would seem the least the Court should do for religious liberty, which is, after all, a constitutionally protected value.

Why Justice Scalia did not choose this route cannot, of course, be answered with any certainty. It may be that for a formalist like Justice Scalia, all-or-nothing-at-all is the best policy. If the Court could not

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45 Id. at 885 (quoting Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145, 167 (1878)).
46 Id. at 888.
47 Id.
48 See id.
49 Id. at 879.
50 FRANK SINATRA WITH HARRY JAMES AND HIS ORCHESTRA, *All or Nothing At All, on All or Nothing At All* (Columbia 1943).
52 *Smith II*, 494 U.S. at 888.
grant full protected status to the religious believer in the context of
criminal law, any lesser standard would invite judicial arbitrariness—
something Justice Scalia has vociferously opposed and which he
warned against at the end of the Smith II opinion.\textsuperscript{53}

But another consideration is suggested by the conclusion of Justi-
cle Scalia’s opinion.\textsuperscript{54} No obvious judicial remedy for the sincere be-
lievers in Smith II could be crafted with anything like the principled
consistency that the nondiscrimination-among-religious-beliefs would
require. The political process, however, was another matter. Justice
Scalia wrote that “[v]alues that are protected against government inter-
ference through enshrinement in the Bill of Rights are not thereby
banished from the political process.”\textsuperscript{55} He invited that political process
to reconsider the issue of religious accommodations, at least in regard
to the peyote use exemptions that some States had already enacted,
and perhaps even more generally to give consideration to the enact-
ment of other particular religious exemptions.\textsuperscript{56}

By referring to the context as one involving a value enshrined in
the Bill of Rights, and then inviting democratic forces to adjust the
protection of this value, Justice Scalia was acknowledging the tension
that this article seeks to explore.\textsuperscript{57} The consequence of Smith II has
been precisely an enormous cultural/political engagement with relig-
ious exemptions, and with the role of religion generally in public life,
of the kind, but surely exceeding the scope, that Justice Scalia foresaw
and called for. That ferment amounts to a popular experiment with
religious liberty. And the context is quasi-constitutional for much the
same reason that Justice Scalia considered the “value” involved to be of
constitutional dimension.

The tension that this popular engagement raises is that in a consti-
tutional system, we do not usually leave such adjustments to the politi-
cal branches and more broadly to politics. We do not usually
experiment with constitutional rights. Perhaps religion is inherently
different and there was no choice, as Justice Scalia seems to have felt.
But, if that is the case, it is worth considering what it is that makes
religion so different. Frankly I would have thought that any system in

\textsuperscript{53} Id. at 890 (warning against a system “in which judges weigh the social importance
of all laws against the centrality of religious beliefs”).

\textsuperscript{54} See id.

\textsuperscript{55} Id.

\textsuperscript{56} See id.

\textsuperscript{57} Id.
which there is a presumptive right in every citizen to own a working gun is much more likely to court anarchy than one in which religious believers can go to court to ask for religious exemptions. But of course, when the gun issue arose, Justice Scalia did not hesitate to protect the right.58

Smith was a 5-1-3 decision, with Justice O’Connor concurring in the judgment that peyote use may be criminally prohibited by the State against sincere religious objection, joined in part by Justices Brennan, Marshall, and Blackmun, who did not concur in the judgment.59 What united the four was their commitment to some kind of heightened judicial scrutiny in cases in which laws and regulations threaten religious conscience.60 Justice O’Connor described that level of scrutiny as requiring “a compelling state interest and . . . means narrowly tailored to achieve that interest” whenever the government substantially burdened religiously motivated conduct.61 Justice O’Connor acknowledged that in most of the Free Exercise cases decided under that standard, the religious claimants had failed to win the exemption, but observed that one does not “judge the vitality of a constitutional doctrine by looking to the won-loss record of the plaintiffs who happen to come before us.”62

Nor did Justice O’Connor deny that failure would likely greet future claimants.63 Justice O’Connor seemed most committed to what I earlier referred to as keeping religious interests on the table: “the First Amendment at least requires a case-by-case determination of the question, sensitive to the facts of each particular claim.”64 Justice O’Connor also admitted that heightened scrutiny does not apply when the government itself is acting rather than regulating others and in special contexts that might require unusual deference to governmental interests, such as the military and prison regulations.65 Justice Scalia had

59 Smith II, 494 U.S. at 891 (O’Connor, J., concurring); id. at 907 (Blackmun, J., dissenting).
60 Id. at 909 (Blackmun, J., dissenting).
61 Id. at 894 (O’Connor, J., concurring).
62 Id. at 897.
63 See id. at 899.
64 Id.
65 See id. at 900 (discussing, for example, Lyng v. Nw. Indian Cemetery Protective Ass’n, 485 U.S. 439 (1988), in which government internal activity affecting religious practice was not evaluated pursuant to heightened scrutiny).
argued in the Smith II opinion that these instances of the failure to apply heightened scrutiny undermined that test altogether.66

In dissent, Justice Blackmun, joined by Justices Brennan and Marshall, disagreed with Justice O’Connor only on what should have been the outcome in Smith II itself, which Justice O’Connor herself considered to be a “close” case.67 Justice Blackmun noted that the issue was not the interest of the state in prohibiting dangerous drugs, but the interest in refusing a narrow religious exemption.68 That interest the dissenters found insufficiently compelling under the facts to justify refusing the exemption, especially given the centrality of religious use of peyote to the group at issue.69

It is questionable whether Justice O’Connor, and even Justice Blackmun, were really using the strict scrutiny analysis they purported to be using. The gap between traditional strict scrutiny, and their uses of it in Smith, was the basis for Justice Scalia’s warning that “watering [strict scrutiny] down here would subvert its rigor in the other fields where it is applied . . . .”70 In the reactions to Smith II, this question of the proper level of review would loom large as a practical matter. Those who objected to Smith II would have to decide whether religious exemptions would routinely be required or only rarely so.

Before moving on to those reactions to the two Smith opinions, however, let me describe the constitutional landscape as those cases left it—referring from now on just to the amalgamation of Smith. When Smith was decided, there was already an established tradition of nonapplication, or modified application, of neutral, generally applicable laws to religious institutions, whether in the ministerial exception cases or in church property disputes.71 Smith expressly preserved some of this case law—the church autonomy cases72—and two different schools of thought emerged about the relationship of these cases to the future of the Free Exercise Clause. In one view, Smith removed the justification for any special treatment for religious institutions. In the other, the church institutional context was unaffected by anything held

66 See id. at 882-84 (majority opinion).
67 Id. at 905 (O’Connor, J., concurring).
68 See id. at 909-10 (Blackmun, J., dissenting).
69 Id. at 910-21.
70 Id. at 888 (majority opinion).
72 Smith II, 494 U.S. at 877. See Lund, supra note 71, at 59.
in Smith. The unanimous opinion in Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC\textsuperscript{73} would decide that question in favor of the latter interpretation.

Smith did not say anything much about the future of hybrid rights.\textsuperscript{74} This has turned out to be more of a mixed bag. Religious associational rights did not fare well in Christian Legal Society v. Martinez,\textsuperscript{75} but religious speech was fully protected in Snyder v. Phelps.\textsuperscript{76} Of course, neither of those cases treated the issues involved as hybrid rights.\textsuperscript{77} In each case, religious liberty was subsumed into other constitutional rights, thereby losing its autonomous status.\textsuperscript{78}

Smith also did not explain what constituted a neutral treatment of religion.\textsuperscript{79} Future cases here would also diverge. Discrimination against religion was clearly present in Lukumi Babalu,\textsuperscript{80} in which the Court would strike down a ban on the ritual slaughter of animals. But in Locke v. Davey,\textsuperscript{81} the Court allowed what looked like a discrimination against religion to stand.

Nor did Smith change anything in regard to the Establishment Clause.\textsuperscript{82} While that subject is beyond my scope in this article, I will say that there is a strange symmetry between what was held in Smith and what would later be held in a series of cases denying standing to challenge alleged government endorsements of religion.\textsuperscript{83} If Smith can be viewed as an anti-religion case in which religious believers have lost the protection of the Free Exercise Clause when the government imposes duties or obligations that violate their religious consciences, the Establishment Clause standing cases can be viewed as pro-religion cases in which nonbelievers or minority believers have lost the protection of the Establishment Clause when challenging government support of religion.

\textsuperscript{73} 132 S. Ct. 694 (2012).
\textsuperscript{74} See generally Smith II, 494 U.S. 872.
\textsuperscript{75} 130 S. Ct. 2971 (2010).
\textsuperscript{76} 131 S. Ct. 1207 (2011).
\textsuperscript{77} Id.; see also Martinez, 130 S. Ct. 2971.
\textsuperscript{78} See Snyder, 131 S. Ct. 1207; see also Martinez, 130 S. Ct. 2971.
\textsuperscript{79} See generally Smith II, 494 U.S. 872.
\textsuperscript{80} Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah, 508 U.S. 520 (1993).
\textsuperscript{81} 540 U.S. 712 (2004).
\textsuperscript{82} See Smith II, 494 U.S. at 867-78.
Although the \textit{Smith} holding was substantive, thus actually constituting an interpretation of the constitutional value at issue—while the Establishment Clause cases are about justiciability, and thus not technically about the meaning of the constitutional value at all—the effect of both lines of cases is the same. In both, society continues a vigorous debate about the proper role of religion in the public square—a debate in which one would expect the Supreme Court to play a role, but in which the Justices have stepped back, allowing popular forces to determine the constitutional balance.

Granted, this symmetry between Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause cases is not complete. There are still some basic Establishment Clause claims that can be brought. But, then, the final word about standing has perhaps not yet been said.

We are now ready to consider the reactions to \textit{Smith}. As suggested above, Justice Scalia invited a political response to the Court’s narrow interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause. That response took three years, but it certainly came. And when it did, it exceeded anything Justice Scalia could have expected or wanted.

\section{The Reactions to \textit{Smith}}

When Donald Beschle writes that “[w]hile the academic response to Smith was mixed, reaction in the political world was sharply negative,”\textsuperscript{84} he is certainly correct, but even his formulation may understate the political hostility to the \textit{Smith} decision. Here is how one respected law and religion textbook describes the political reaction: “The ACLU and Americans United joined the American Center for Law and Justice and the Christian Legal Society, the American Jewish Congress joined the National Association of Evangelicals, and Republicans joined Democrats in enacting legislation, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) . . . .”\textsuperscript{85} RFRA ultimately passed “with nearly unanimous bipartisan support.”\textsuperscript{86}

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There are two important points about this early reaction to Smith for purposes of this article. First, there were, even at the start, ideological fissures within the broad coalition that enacted RFRA. That is why the statute was not enacted right away, but instead only three years after Smith was announced.\(^{87}\) RFRA got caught up in the abortion wars.\(^{88}\) The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops feared that RFRA might somehow allow pregnant women to argue that abortion restrictions violated their religious rights.\(^{89}\) The opposition of the Bishops caused President George H. W. Bush to threaten a veto of an early version of RFRA unless the subject of abortion was exempted from the coverage of the statute.\(^{90}\) This demand would not be met for obvious political reasons, and so RFRA would not pass until President Bill Clinton indicated a willingness to sign a later version of the statute that did not contain any references to abortion.\(^{91}\) Years later, parallel demands for exemption from the coverage of State versions of RFRA would complicate efforts to enact state versions.\(^{92}\) So, from the start, efforts to respond to Smith led to fundamental political struggles.

The other important aspect of the enactment of RFRA was the nature of the opposition to Smith. Clearly, Justice Scalia expected that new legislation might be passed to deal with the issues raised in the Smith case.\(^{93}\) But what Justice Scalia had in mind was a limited legislative response, presumably at the state level, that would recognize religious exemptions to criminal laws governing use of peyote, or even religious exemptions for other illegal drugs that might be central to religious worship in other religious traditions.\(^{94}\)

But that limited response was not the aim of the RFRA coalition.\(^{95}\) RFRA was intended to “restore”—hence the title of the statute—a standard of heightened scrutiny for all claims of religious exemption from

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\(^{87}\) 139 CONG. REC. S14,470 (daily ed. Oct. 27, 1993); 139 CONG. REC. H2363 (daily ed. May 11, 1993).


\(^{89}\) Id.

\(^{90}\) Id.

\(^{91}\) Id.


\(^{94}\) Id.

the demands of neutral, generally applicable law.96 The way this was put in RFRA’s Purpose section was “to restore the compelling interest test as set forth in Sherbert v. Verner and Wisconsin v. Yoder and to guarantee its application in all cases where free exercise of religion is substantially burdened . . . .”97 That purpose was operationalized in the statute by the prohibition that “Government shall not substantially burden a person’s exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability” unless the government demonstrates that the burden “is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest” and “is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.”98 Another section of the statute indicated that it applied to “all Federal and State law,” which was amended after the decision in City of Boerne v. Flores99 invalidated RFRA insofar as it applied to state and local law.100

RFRA raised a number of questions. The major issue in terms of the constitutionality of RFRA itself was whether Congress could in effect reverse an interpretation of the Constitution by the Supreme Court through Congress’s enforcement power under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court held in Boerne, effectively unanimous on this point, that it could not. I will return to the issue of Congressional authority below, in Section 3.

Just as significant for purposes of this article is the question, what exactly did RFRA restore? Not only had the Court not always applied heightened scrutiny in cases of substantial burdens on the exercise of religion—the Court had not done so in cases of internal government activity,101 for example—but the Justices did not agree on how exacting the heightened scrutiny standard actually was—as indicated by the disagreement between Justice O’Connor’s concurrence and Justice Blackmun’s dissent in Smith itself.102 Did Congress mean to take a position on the kind of heightened scrutiny the courts should apply? The ques-

97 Id.
101 See Bower v. Roy, 476 U.S. 693, 699 (1986) (“The Free Exercise Clause simply cannot be understood to require the Government to Conduct its own internal affairs in ways that comport with the religious beliefs of particular citizens.”).
tion of the meaning of heightened scrutiny would recur in coming debates over religious exemptions.\footnote{103 See infra notes 185-209 and accompanying text.}

Because RFRA was written to apply to federal, state, and local law, its passage forestalled for a time large-scale efforts at the state level to overturn or limit the effect of Smith.\footnote{104 See Hamilton, supra note 92.} Those efforts would begin in earnest once the Supreme Court in Boerne overturned RFRA as it applied beyond the federal government to state and local law.\footnote{105 See City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507 (1997).}

The various opinions in Boerne amounted to a recapitulation of arguments about the result in Smith, specifically the result insofar as Smith had held that religious objections to neutral, generally applicable laws should not be evaluated under a heightened scrutiny standard.\footnote{106 See generally id.} Justice Kennedy’s six-Justice majority opinion reaffirmed that rule from Smith and held that RFRA exceeded Congress’s power to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment, since the statute amounted to a disagreement with the Court’s substantive interpretation of the First Amendment rather than a prophylactic measure to prevent violations of the Constitution as the Court had interpreted it.\footnote{107 Id. at 533-36.} Justice O’Connor in dissent expressly agreed that if the rule in Smith had been a correct interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause, she would have joined the majority in repudiating RFRA.\footnote{108 Id. at 545 (O’Connor, J., dissenting).} Justice Souter in dissent would not have decided whether Smith should be affirmed or overturned without “plenary reexamination” of the soundness of Smith.\footnote{109 Id. at 565-66 (Souter, J., dissenting).} Justice Breyer in dissent agreed that there should be reargument on the question of whether Smith had been correctly decided, but, alone among the Justices, was willing to entertain the possibility that even if Smith had been decided correctly, RFRA might still be constitutional.\footnote{110 Id. at 566 (Breyer, J., dissenting).}

In a repudiation of any of the theories of constitutional interpretation that challenge judicial supremacy and uniqueness—the sort of theories I will discuss in Part IV of this article below—not a single Justice suggested in Boerne that if such overwhelming majorities in Congress, tantamount to unanimity, rejected Smith, this should count as serious, independent evidence that the Court was wrong in its interpre-
tation of the Constitution. No Justice seemed to care that the American people, through their representatives, apparently took a different view of the meaning of the Free Exercise Clause. Every Justice refused, in the words of Michael Farris, “to give strong consideration to the message it received from the elected representatives of the people.”

Only one Justice in *Boerne*—Stevens—indicated that, by legislating a presumed exemption for religiously motivated objections—and only religiously motivated objections—to neutral laws, RFRA violated the Establishment Clause. Adverting to the facts of the case, in which a building permit had been denied to enlarge a church, Justice Stevens stated his objection that “[i]f the historic landmark on the hill in Boerne happened to be a museum or an art gallery owned by an atheist, it would not be eligible for an exemption for the city ordinances that forbid an enlargement of the structure.” Of course, the objection raised by Justice Stevens—the permissibility of specifically religious exemptions—would have to be faced under any of the other attempts to reinstate heightened scrutiny for challenges to neutral laws brought on religious grounds.

Although Justice Kennedy’s opinion in *Boerne* did not comment upon the effectiveness of RFRA with regard to federal law, there was obviously no dearth of Congressional authority to apply RFRA as a general limitation on the reach of federal law. Without any extended analysis distinguishing *Boerne* as a federalism case in which Congress had lacked authority to reach state and local laws once the enforcement authority of Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment had proven inadequate, the Court in *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal* simply applied RFRA to the case of a religious sect seeking injunctive relief against federal enforcement efforts blocking use of a sacred tea containing a hallucinogenic ingredient controlled under federal law. Chief Justice Roberts’s unanimous opinion upheld the grant of a preliminary injunction because the government had “not carried the burden expressly placed on it by Congress . . . .”

112 *Boerne*, 521 U.S. at 536-37 (Stevens, J., concurring).
113 Id. at 537.
114 Farris, supra note 111, at 691.
116 Id. at 423.
Experimenting with Religious Liberty

After Boerne, efforts to promote religion-based exemptions to neutral, generally applicable laws fragmented into a number of different avenues: experiments. In the remainder of this part, I will outline the basic channels in which these efforts moved. These experiments may be divided into five basic undertakings: future federal constitutional litigation; litigation against the federal government under RFRA; federal statutory regulation of state and local burdens on religious practice; state legislative efforts to enact religious exemptions, either statutory or as state constitutional amendments; and state judicial interpretations of state constitutional provisions parallel to the Free Exercise Clause.¹¹⁷ This list leaves out the pure political struggles over religious liberty that are currently so heated. I will take up that topic in Part III.

1. Federal Constitutional Litigation on Behalf of Claimed Religious Exemptions

As mentioned above, after Smith, there were still a variety of ways in which a religious believer might raise a challenge to the application of laws that were said to substantially burden religious practice. In the first place, Smith required that laws be neutral and generally applicable before heightened scrutiny review was eliminated.¹¹⁸ In Smith itself, this was not an issue because the criminal law in that case was an across-the-board prohibition against the use of an illegal drug.¹¹⁹

Laws specifically aimed at regulating religious practices would not be considered neutral and would raise serious constitutional issues, including issues pursuant to the Free Exercise Clause. In Lukumi Babalu, Justice Kennedy reiterated that a law that restricted a practice because of its religious motivation would not be considered neutral and would violate the Free Exercise Clause unless it satisfied the compelling state interest test.¹²⁰ The law at issue in Lukumi Babalu was held to have as its object the suppression of animal ritual sacrifice practiced by a particular religious sect and was therefore held unconstitutional.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Despite earnest calls by a few, there has not been much movement in support for a federal religious freedom constitutional amendment. Of course, that remains a future option. See Farris, supra note 111, at 691, 704-06; J. Jeffrey Patterson, The Long Road Toward Restoration of Religious Freedom: Congressional Options in Light of City of Boerne v. Flores, 87 Ky. L.J. 253, 271-76 (1999).
¹¹⁹ Id. at 874.
¹²¹ Id. at 524, 534.
Neutrality, however, is not a self-defining concept, and most cases in which laws refer to religion are not as clearly unconstitutional as was the law in *Lukumi Babalu*. In *Locke v. Davey*, there was undeniably a discrimination against religion in the sense that a state scholarship program would fund, on behalf of eligible students, the pursuit of any postsecondary degree except one in “devotional theology.” The Ninth Circuit had held that this difference in treatment for only “a major in theology that is taught from a religious perspective” was not neutral, triggering strict scrutiny that the state’s Establishment Clause concerns did not satisfy. But Chief Justice Rehnquist held that there was no discrimination because applied religious study does not have a secular equivalent and is “akin to a religious calling as well as an academic pursuit.” Therefore, the state scholarship program exception did not discriminate against religion.

The meaning of neutrality promises to be a significant issue in the future. For example, in a portion of the lawsuits currently challenging the requirement of employer coverage of contraceptive services under the ACA, plaintiffs are arguing that since the employer mandate exempts some institutions—churches, for example—its failure to exempt all religious institutions renders the mandate non-neutral for purposes of *Smith*. Because RFRA will probably apply to these challenges, this issue of non-neutrality may not be reached since the Free Exercise standard in the case of non-neutral requirements is the same as RFRA’s standard. Courts, therefore, may see no need to reach the constitutional issue. Nevertheless, this example demonstrates that neutrality may not always be present, once governments begin to grant religious exemptions.

Neutrality challenges may also arise pursuant to some state RFRA exclusions. Christopher Lund has charted recent state RFRA developments. He notes that States have adopted “idiosyncratic coverage ex-

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122 See id. at 534-35 (discussing how the ordinance specifically targeted the Santeria).
125 Id. at 760.
126 *Locke*, 540 U.S. at 721.
127 Id. at 725.
A number of States treat inmate claims differently, but other exclusions, such as drug- or motor vehicle-related claims, do not present any kind of coherent pattern. While Lund argues that “[t]here seems to be little constitutional problem with these coverage exclusions[.],” it is not clear that a state is acting neutrally with regard to a religious exemption request that it excludes from its RFRA when other religious claims are accommodated. Lund may be right, but the matter will undoubtedly be litigated in an attempt to invoke non-Smith Free Exercise protections.

A similar issue arose prior to Smith in Olsen v. Drug Enforcement Administration in an opinion by then-Circuit Judge Ginsburg, in which members of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church claimed that the failure to grant a religious exemption for the sacramental use of marijuana in light of the peyote exemption granted to the Native American Church, constituted a violation of Equal Protection and Establishment Clause principles. The court rejected that claim. But one can easily foresee an argument challenging the decision of a State with a generally applicable religious exemption statute to exclude some religious claims from the reach of that statute as a non-neutral decision.

Smith also did not alter the existing case law concerning church autonomy. Thus, churches engaged in property disputes or disputes over the recognition of church authority, or churches resisting state regulation concerning religious issues, could still, after Smith, demand to be exempt from the laws and regulations that might otherwise govern.

The most significant line of church autonomy/religious exemption cases to survive Smith turned out to be the ministerial exception unanimously reaffirmed in Hosanna-Tabor. Chief Justice Roberts’s
opinion in that case addressed the argument that no ministerial exception survived *Smith*.139 *Hosanna-Tabor* involved an employment discrimination claim against a church by a teacher the church claimed was a minister.140 The EEOC and the plaintiff argued that churches were protected in the employment context to the extent desirable by general principles applicable to certain nonreligious groups, such as freedom of association, and that this approach would accord with the interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause upheld in *Smith*, since employment discrimination laws are neutral, generally applicable laws.141

Chief Justice Roberts rejected these arguments.142 First, both religion clauses—the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause—must have some application to the historically significant issue of the right of a religious organization to select its own leaders, free of government interference.143 Any other holding would be “remarkable.”144

As for *Smith*, religious exemptions for the individual, the subject of *Smith*, “involved government regulation of only outward physical acts.”145 In contrast, government interference with ministerial relations, as in government enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in the context of ministerial selection and retention, “affect[ ] the faith and mission of the church itself.”146 Thus, the ministerial exception was unaffected by *Smith*.147

I have no idea what that distinction means, other than the untenable possibility that only one individual’s religious faith is threatened in the *Smith* context, versus the faith of a whole congregation, which is threatened by a government institutional interference. It has certainly been suggested, most notably in Patrick Garry’s book, *Wrestling With God*,148 that the Free Exercise Clause protects individual religious liberty, whereas the Establishment Clause protects the institutional autonomy of religious organizations, but Chief Justice Roberts did not defend that distinction in *Hosanna-Tabor*—the opinion expressly relied

139 See id. at 705-07.
140 See id. at 701.
141 See id. at 706-07.
142 See generally id.
143 See id. at 702.
144 Id. at 706.
145 Id. at 707.
146 Id.
147 See id.
on both religion clauses\textsuperscript{149} and there is no sense of its presence in the majority opinion in \textit{Smith}, which said nothing about the Establishment Clause.

Undoubtedly Justice Scalia agreed with the distinction between regulation of individuals and regulation of a church—he not only joined Roberts’s opinion, but also was heard to say in oral argument in \textit{Hosanna-Tabor} that “this case has nothing to do with \textit{Smith}.”\textsuperscript{150} The question is, why? Many distinctions come to mind—after all, the lower federal courts continued to apply the ministerial exception after \textit{Smith} was decided,\textsuperscript{151} so one can hardly claim that there is no coherence in distinguishing individual religious claims of conscience from institutional autonomy.

But why did the Court in \textit{Smith} reject a claim equally as plausible as the ministerial exception—that an individual believer might have some protection from government impositions that threaten religious conscience? The answer may be the fear of anarchy, which, given the pragmatic differences between individual claims and the claims of religious institutions, was not as likely to occur in the context of the ministerial exception. To put it bluntly, any kook can raise a \textit{Smith} claim, but it takes something like the Catholic Church to raise the ministerial exception. I do not mean to suggest that Justice Scalia in \textit{Smith} knew that his own Catholic tradition would continue to enjoy constitutional protection. I mean only that in \textit{Hosanna-Tabor}, Justice Scalia’s innate conservatism that venerates established institutions could assuage any fear that a religious exemption in the institutional context would get out of hand.

Despite the breadth and certainty of \textit{Hosanna-Tabor}, there may yet be future litigation over the ministerial exception. The unanimity of the decision will preclude direct challenges to the ministerial exception doctrine, and I do not believe there will be much litigation over the related question of just who is a minister.\textsuperscript{152} But Chief Justice Rob-

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Hosanna-Tabor}, 132 S. Ct. at 702 (“Both Religion Clauses bar the government from interfering with the decision of a religious group to fire one of its ministers.”).

\textsuperscript{150} E-mail from Douglas Laycock, Robert E. Scott Distinguished Professor of Law, Univ. of Va. Law Sch., to Eric J. Segall, Con Law Prof List (Jan. 11, 2012, 12:55 PM), available at http://lists.ucla.edu/pipermail/conlawprof/2012-January/039350.html.


\textsuperscript{152} In contrast, my fellow panelists at the Elon Law Symposium, Mark Strasser and Aaron Petty, believe that the question of who is a minister will become quite important and controversial. See Mark Strasser, Presentation at the Elon Law Review Symposium:
erts had a clear idea of what kind of case the ministerial exception prohibits—challenges to the severance of a minister in alleged violation of some aspect of an anti-discrimination law. The opinion reserved judgment, however, on what might be considered the most likely kind of legal challenge—one by a minister for breach of contract.

After rejecting the government’s argument in *Hosanna-Tabor* that the church’s autonomy should be protected by the same freedom of association right that applies to certain other communicative organizations, Chief Justice Roberts proceeded to ignore right of association principles altogether. Both the underlying argument and the structure of its rejection illustrate that the one category of religious rights that *Smith* expressly recognized as protected—that of hybrid rights, as in the amalgamation of Free Exercise and parental rights in *Yoder*—was actually undermined by the result in *Smith*. Because *Smith* gave no independent traction to the right of Free Exercise in the face of neutral, generally applicable laws, the Court in *Hosanna-Tabor* analyzed the case as either a right of association case or a religious rights case. It did not occur to the Court that the right of association might be strengthened by the presence of religious liberty values or vice versa.

This has also been the pattern in recent cases in which religious believers bring what could be characterized as hybrid rights claims—the religious liberty claims are either summarily dismissed under *Smith* or simply drop out of the case.

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154 Id. at 710.
156 See *Hosanna-Tabor*, 132 S. Ct. 694.
157 See id.
158 See infra notes 159-60.
nomenon can be seen are Christian Legal Society v. Martinez\(^{159}\) and Snyder v. Phelps.\(^{160}\)

In Christian Legal Society, the Court upheld a law school’s requirement of an all-comers policy as applied to a student religious organization.\(^ {161}\) Justice Ginsburg’s majority opinion analyzed the case extensively as a limited public forum case\(^ {162}\) and concluded that the policy was reasonable and viewpoint neutral.\(^ {163}\) In regard to the Free Exercise claim, Justice Ginsburg was dismissive: “CLS briefly argues that Hastings’ all-comers condition violates the Free Exercise Clause. Our decision in Smith forecloses that argument. In Smith, the Court held that the Free Exercise Clause does not inhibit enforcement of otherwise valid regulations of general application that incidentally burden religious conduct.”\(^ {164}\)

This observation made no sense in terms of the Smith opinion. The claim by CLS was precisely the sort of hybrid right—in this case free exercise/free speech association—that entitled the parents in Yoder to heightened scrutiny review. Furthermore, it is telling that Justice Alito’s dissent did not even mention Smith.\(^ {165}\) In Christian Legal Society, hybrid rights did not exist.

One can draw the same conclusion from Snyder, in which the religious claimant was successful under a non-religious rationale.\(^ {166}\) In Snyder, a church conducted an anti-homosexual demonstration near the funeral of a member of the military.\(^ {167}\) The father of the deceased soldier brought claims for intentional infliction of emotional distress, invasion of privacy, and civil conspiracy and won a jury verdict.\(^ {168}\) That verdict was overturned on grounds of Free Speech.\(^ {169}\) Chief Justice Roberts’s majority opinion affirmed that reversal.\(^ {170}\) Although there was not any doubt that the demonstration in the case proceeded from

\(^{159}\) 130 S. Ct. 2971 (2010).
\(^{160}\) 131 S. Ct. 1207 (2011).
\(^{161}\) 130 S. Ct. at 2995.
\(^{162}\) Id. at 2985 (“our limited-public-forum precedents supply the appropriate framework for assessing both CLS’s speech and association rights”).
\(^{163}\) Id. at 2993.
\(^{164}\) Id. at 2995 n.27 (citations omitted).
\(^{165}\) See id. at 3000-20.
\(^{166}\) See generally Snyder v. Phelps, 131 S. Ct. 1207 (2011).
\(^{167}\) See id. at 1213-14.
\(^{168}\) See id. at 1214.
\(^{169}\) See id.
\(^{170}\) See id. at 1221.
the ministry of the church, that fact played no role whatsoever in the opinion, which would have been written in the same way had the demonstration taken place out of any other motivation.171 The conclusion can be drawn that when any other constitutional right is available in support of a claimed religious exemption, that other source will be litigated, probably exclusively.

2. RFRA Claims Against the Federal Government

As noted above, RFRA claims figure in the ongoing dispute over religious exemptions from provisions of the ACA.172 So, obviously RFRA will be an important potential source of protection of religious liberty in the future. What, then, are the promises and limitations of RFRA?

In Boerne, Justice Stevens raised doubts about the constitutionality of RFRA on the ground that it protected religious believers but not nonbelievers in violation of the Establishment Clause.173 One might think that these constitutional doubts were assuaged by Justice Stevens’s decision to join Justice Ginsburg’s unanimous opinion in Cutter v. Wilkinson, which in 2005 upheld the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA) against a similar Establishment Clause attack.174

But Cutter upheld only the part of RLUIPA that protected the religious rights of incarcerated persons.175 Since any accommodations for such persons inevitably involve the lessening of burdens on religious practice that the government itself imposed in some way, and since government control in these circumstances is extreme, RLUIPA might or might not stand as precedent for upholding RFRA. That, plus the note in Cutter reminding everyone that the Court had not yet

171 See id.
173 City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507, 537 (1997) (Stevens, J., concurring). I am skipping over the constitutional question raised in a number of Circuits that Congress might lack legislative authority to apply RFRA even to federal law and officials. Every court that addressed that issue concluded that Congress could validly enact RFRA in the federal law context. See, e.g., Hankins v. Lyght, 441 F.3d 96, 105-06 (2d Cir. 2006).
175 Id. at 713.
ruled on the application of RFRA to federal law,176 might counsel restraint in relying on Cutter.

However, the Court did apply RFRA in O Centro without questioning its constitutionality and did not comment on any potential Establishment Clause limit.177 That silence might mean nothing, of course. But since the lower federal courts have continued to hear RFRA challenges to federal law since Boerne and have not declared RFRA to be a violation of the Establishment Clause on its face, one would have to conclude that RFRA is constitutional per se.

That is not to say that a particular accommodation of religion that is held to be required by RFRA might not violate the Establishment Clause. An accommodation might so one-sidedly benefit a religious believer to the detriment of others that it violates the Establishment Clause.178 But such an eventuality is unlikely because RFRA does not appear to be that specific and exacting. A court would not feel obligated to grant such unconstitutional relief under RFRA.

This easy assurance, however, leads to the question of what RFRA actually does require. It is sometimes asserted that RFRA provides to the religious believer more protection than is afforded under the First Amendment.179 This is undoubtedly true in a sense. RFRA was enacted to counter the effect of Smith, which, after all, provided no protection against the application of neutral, generally applicable laws that burdened religious conscience. So, in that sense, RFRA goes beyond the requirements of the Free Exercise Clause.

But is there any more to RFRA than that? Does RFRA simply return the playing field to a point prior to Smith? That outcome would not necessarily protect religious liberty very much. As one student Note has put it, “RFRA lends itself to two possible interpretations: a

176 Id. at 715 n.2.
178 See, e.g., Thornton v. Caldor, 472 U.S. 703 (1985) (striking down state law as violative of Establishment Clause that relieved religious believer of work obligations on the believer’s Sabbath no matter the burden on the employer or other employees).

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true compelling governmental interest test or a moderate balancing test."\textsuperscript{180}

RFRA’s stated purpose is to “restore the compelling interest test as set forth in [\textit{Sherbert} and \textit{Yoder}] . . . .”\textsuperscript{181} But what exactly was that test? In \textit{Smith}, Justice Scalia considered the stringency of the compelling interest test to be one of the reasons it could not actually be applied in religious burden cases.\textsuperscript{182} If applied according to its usage in other areas of law, “many laws will not meet the test,” which would “court[ ] anarchy,” if every sincere believer could invoke it.\textsuperscript{183} On the other hand, watering it down would not do either because the test would then lose its demanding nature in areas in which that stringency is necessary.\textsuperscript{184} Justice Scalia’s concerns would seem to have been justified by the only Supreme Court decision applying RFRA—\textit{O Centro}—in which the Court seemed to be very exacting in requiring a religious exemption for sacramental use of an illegal drug.\textsuperscript{185}

However, there has been no anarchy. Most claims under RFRA fail, either because a court holds that there was no substantial burden on the Free Exercise of religion or because the government is held to have satisfied the compelling interest test.\textsuperscript{186}

Nor was this outcome necessarily unanticipated by RFRA’s framers. After all, despite the compelling state interest test, the \textit{Sherbert} line of cases was a paper tiger—the Court never actually invalidated any government action except the denial of unemployment compensation benefits.\textsuperscript{187}

It is also unclear whether the exceptions to the application of the compelling interest test that occurred in the \textit{Sherbert} line—internal government activities and specialized contexts, such as the military—were meant to be imported into RFRA as well. The Ninth Circuit, for exam-

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Id.} at 888.
\textsuperscript{184} See \textit{id}.
\textsuperscript{186} See infra notes 189-203 and accompanying text.
ple, held en banc in 2008 in a Lyng-like analysis restricting the application of RFRA in the context of federal government actions on its own land, that “government action that decreases the spirituality, the fervor, or the satisfaction with which a believer practices his religion is not what Congress has labeled a ‘substantial burden’ . . . on the free exercise of religion.” The term “substantial burden” in RFRA was a “term of art” to be “defined by reference to Supreme Court precedent.” Even a critic of that decision expects most judges to rule similarly in the absence of further statutory amendment, though others are more hopeful of future protection of religious practice. While internal government areas such as the military regulations were not excluded from the reach of RFRA, there may have been anticipation that the government burden would be easier to satisfy in some realms than in others.

Even the statutory linkage of the compelling test to both Sherbert and Yoder may be misleading, since the orders of magnitude of the government interests in the two cases were so different; Sherbert really just involved government money, whereas Yoder concerned educational opportunities for children. Sherbert might have been decided the same way under a variety of middling standards or tests, but Yoder did require something like strict scrutiny to justify its outcome of denying children an education by exempting them from a mandatory attendance law.

Ira Lupu argued in 1999 that RFRA had done little to increase the success rate of plaintiffs in Free Exercise litigation and noted that

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189 Navajo Nation, 535 F.3d at 1063.
190 Id.
192 See Michelle Kay Albert, Note, Obligations and Opportunities to Protect Native American Sacred Sites Located on Public Lands, 40 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 479 (2009).
195 See generally Yoder, 406 U.S. 205.
the government prevails in eighty-five percent of RFRA cases.\textsuperscript{197} Indeed, one of the reasons that RLUIPA was enacted was that land use and institutionalized persons had not achieved success in bringing actions under RFRA.\textsuperscript{198}

No one can say whether this trend will continue. Chris Lund has suggested that Chief Justice Roberts’s \textit{O Centro} decision essentially endorsed the more religiously-protective approach of the Blackmun dissent in \textit{Smith} and rejected the concurring position of Justice O’Connor that accepted as compelling the government’s argument that any exceptions would threaten the drug enforcement scheme.\textsuperscript{199} Lund says that \textit{O Centro} “mocks” that position.\textsuperscript{200} The approach in \textit{O Centro} would change the landscape of judicial protection from federal legislative and administrative actions that threaten religious practices.

But Lund admits that whether the courts will really follow the implications of \textit{O Centro} is an open question.\textsuperscript{201} Early indications are not particularly promising.\textsuperscript{202}

It may be that such predictions, either way, are beside the point. RFRA creates a general umbrella under which a wide variety of claims of religious liberty against all sorts of federal government action can be raised.\textsuperscript{203} Over time, the results will probably reflect societal views of the importance of religious exemptions. For now, federal judges may be said to value stability and efficiency over religious liberty. However, if a cultural change occurs in which society reaches a new and different view of the desirability of religious exemptions, RFRA will furnish one of the forums in which that change will manifest.

\textsuperscript{197} Id.
\textsuperscript{198} See Thomas E. Caccuia, Note, RLUIPA and Exclusionary Zoning Government Defendants Should Have the Burden of Persuasion in Equal Terms Cases, 80 FORDHAM L. REV. 1853, 1864 n.95 (2012) (“It is worth noting that prior to RLUIPA, religious land use plaintiffs were almost universally unsuccessful, in both constitutional challenges and under RFRA.”).
\textsuperscript{200} Id. at 473.
\textsuperscript{201} Id. at 496.
\textsuperscript{202} See Matthew Nicholson, Note, Is \textit{O Centro} a Sign of Hope for RFRA Claimants?, 95 VA. L. REV. 1281 (2009). It is worth noting that in a decision in one of the dozens of lawsuits challenging the HHS contraception mandate under the ACA, a Missouri federal district judge granted a motion to dismiss on the ground that the mandate does not constitute a substantial burden on the plaintiff’s exercise of religion. O’Brien Indus. Holdings v. Dep’t of Health & Human Serv., 894 F. Supp. 2d 1149 (E.D. Mo. 2012).
\textsuperscript{203} Id.
Whatever interpretive shape RFRA ultimately takes, there is no reason in theory that the goal of protection of religious liberty and the attainment of religious exemptions from the requirements of federal law will not be accomplished. RFRA provides all the tools necessary. RFRA also represents the possibility of further legislative development by statutory amendment, if that is felt to be necessary. Such a future amendment might strengthen or weaken RFRA.

3. Federal Regulation of State and Local Burdens on the Free Exercise of Religion

But all of the above has to do only with federal law and administration. RFRA originally had been designed as a response to Smith at all levels of government, including state and local governments. That design was short-circuited in Boerne. While no one would suggest that Boerne rendered RFRA irrelevant, the decision certainly did restrict the Act’s importance. As Lund points out, for religious liberty to be meaningful in America, with its overlapping levels of government, there often must be protections at the federal, state, and local levels. Protection for the religious believer at only one level of government can be meaningless.

Attempts to create such protection through Congressional action, however, have confronted, and continue to confront, difficult issues of constitutional federalism. The need to create a federal remedy arose from the recognition that, while some states and local governments would, and had, acted to create their own legislative protections for religious practice in light of Smith’s retreat, other states and local governments would not. In addition, even where state and local legislation was adopted, the interpretation of such legislation would be likely to vary greatly without the involvement of the federal courts and ultimately the Supreme Court to ensure a consistent interpretation. Only some form of federal legislation could accomplish that.

The problem was that Boerne had cut off the most obvious source of Congressional power to bind the states and local governments—the enforcement language in Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment. Without delving too deeply into constitutional federalism issues be-

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204 See City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507 (1997); see also supra note100 and accompanying text.
205 Lund, State RFRAS, supra note 43, at 467.
206 Boerne, 521 U.S. at 529-36.
yond the scope of this article, let me point out some of the structural issues that faced the RFRA coalition after *Boerne* struck down the application of RFRA to state and local government action.207

Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the parallel enforcement provisions of the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, are not the only ways for Congress to bind state and local governments. Congress can generally do that under its Article I powers.208 What Congress cannot do, however, under most of its Article I powers, is create causes of action against the states, especially for money damages.209 Those causes of action are barred by the Eleventh Amendment.210

By way of illustration, consider the Commerce Clause. Under the Commerce Clause, Congress can require that states and local governments pay their employees minimum wage.211 That federal requirement is itself valid and binding. Pursuant to that federal requirement, Congress can authorize a cause of action by the employee of a local government to recover past wages; but Congress cannot authorize a cause of action for past wages against a state.212 This limitation is softened, however, because, under what is known as the fiction of *Ex Parte Young*, a suit for injunctive relief against the responsible State Administrator can force the payment of the proper wage by the state going forward.213

In the context of protecting religious liberty, Congress did not have to worry too much about causes of action for damages. Even under the Eleventh Amendment, an individual can utilize a valid federal obligation as a defense against an action by a state.214 Often, that

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207 *Id.* at 508.
209 U.S. CONST. amend. XI.
210 *Id.*
214 The Eleventh Amendment bars suits against the State in federal court and even bars Congress from authorizing suits against states in state courts. See *Alden v. Maine*, 527 U.S. 706 (1999). But the Amendment has no application to a federal defense against a state’s proceeding against an individual in state court. See Vicki C. Jackson, *The Supreme Court, The Eleventh Amendment, and State Sovereign Immunity*, 98 YALE L.J. 1 (1988)
will be the situation when a religious exemption is sought. The state will be seeking to enforce state law against the religious believer. That is why RFRA provided specifically for a "defense to persons whose religious exercise is substantially burdened by government."\textsuperscript{215} Also, the relief sought under RFRA would often apply, as it did in \textit{Boerne},\textsuperscript{216} against a local government, in which case the Eleventh Amendment prohibition would not apply.

So, Congress did not really need Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment to avoid the Eleventh Amendment state immunity in the context of protecting religious liberty. Therefore, if Congress could find other sources of authority, Congress could still bind the states and local governments.

The problem with Congress requiring the states and local governments to provide religious exemptions was that, other than the reach of the Constitution itself, there is no federal power that reaches all that states and local governments do. In other words, the states and local governments may never violate substantive constitutional rights. But if RFRA does not enforce constitutional rights, as \textit{Boerne} held it does not,\textsuperscript{217} then Congress lacks any other authority that would bind the states and local governments in everything they do.

Congress’s first attempt to respond to \textit{Boerne}—the Religious Liberty Protection Act (RLPA)—ended in legislative deadlock in 1998 and 1999.\textsuperscript{218} RLPA was another attempt to reach all or most state and local governmental actions, but this time relying on Congress’s authority under the Commerce and Spending Clauses.\textsuperscript{219} That effort founndered because of constitutional questions—whether Congress had actually identified sources of authority that would support the reach of the


\textsuperscript{216} See generally City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507 (1997).

\textsuperscript{217} Id. at 532.


\textsuperscript{219} Gary R. Rom, Note, \textit{RLUIPA and Prisoner’s Rights: Vindicating Liberty of Conscience For the Condemned By Targeting a State’s Bottom Line}, 44 Va. L. Rev. 283, 289 n.30 (2009) (“RLPA was essentially the same as RFRA, but Congress used its authority under the Spending and Commerce Clauses as opposed to its Section Five power.”).
bill\textsuperscript{220}—and also because of growing concerns about religious liberty itself. Douglas Laycock describes the changed legislative atmosphere in 1999 compared to the days of near-unanimous support for RFRA in 1993:

The most important thing that happened was a series of lawsuits against small landlords who refused to rent apartments to unmarried opposite-sex couples. The couples alleged marital-status discrimination; the landlords defended on the basis of religious liberty. In the two highest profile cases, a California landlord lost in the state supreme court; an Alaska landlord won, at least temporarily, in the Ninth Circuit. Everyone understood that if religious landlords had a defense to marital-status discrimination, they would also have a defense to sexual-orientation discrimination.

This litigation galvanized the gay rights movement. Gay groups organized the entire civil rights movement to oppose RLPA as drafted. They wanted a global exception for any civil rights claim. The bill’s supporters would not agree.\textsuperscript{221}

I will return to this theme of the growing controversy over the protection of religious liberty in Part III.

The response to the legislative failure of RLPA was RLUIPA.\textsuperscript{222} Limiting the areas of religious protections to land use laws, such as zoning, and institutionalized persons, such as prisoners and patients at mental hospitals, lessened the fear of unreasonable claims of religious liberty, tied the Act more closely to Congressional authority, and identified areas in which the evidence of unconstitutional governmental conduct, even under \textit{Smith}, was strongest.\textsuperscript{223}

RLUIPA, much like RFRA before it, applies the compelling interest/least restrictive means test to state or local government impositions of substantial burdens on religious exercise by institutionalized persons,\textsuperscript{224} and to land use regulations that impose substantial burdens on


It seems clear that the Act per se is constitutional. It has been upheld by the Supreme Court in *Cutter* (though Justice Thomas did indicate doubts about Congress’s authority to enact it under the Commerce and Spending Clauses), and lower courts have applied the land use provisions without constitutional hesitation.

It is difficult to say precisely what effect RLUIPA has had, however. In the context of prisoners’ rights, RLUIPA was enacted with broad left-right ideological support in the face of reports “of heavy-handed treatment of prisoners’ religious claims.” After twenty years of RFRA application to federal prisons and, more recently, RLUIPA, “prison officials often allow inmates to read scriptures, attend services, eat religious foods, and participate in fasts.” Certainly the religious rights of the institutionalized are today respected to a greater degree than before 1993. On the other hand, courts have been sensitive to the monetary impact of RLUIPA claims. Indeed, it has been argued that the costs of prison compliance with RLUIPA are so great as to possibly violate the Establishment Clause because of the effect on third parties.

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225 *Id.* § 2000cc(a)(1). There are also protections in the Act that prohibit discriminatory land use regulations or exclusion of religious uses, but these provisions apparently have not been much utilized. *See* Daniel P. Lennington, *Thou Shalt Not Zone: The Overbroad Applications and Troubling Implications of RLUIPA’s Land Use Provisions*, 29 *Seattle U. L. Rev.* 805, 815 (2006).


230 *See* generally Alan C. Weinstein, *The Effect of RLUIPA’s Land Use Provisions on Local Governments*, 39 *Fordham Urb. L.J.* 1221, 1240 (2012) (“Although some have claimed that RLUIPA has seriously compromised the ability of local governments to administer local land use regulations in a manner that fairly balances the needs of both religious and secular interests, those claims are not supported by any empirical data.”).


In terms of land use regulations, the difficulty of evaluating the effects of RLUIPA are twofold. First, courts have interpreted the Act narrowly, both in terms of what is a religious exercise and what is a substantial burden. Second, it is not clear that the land use regulations at issue in most RLUIPA cases are generally applicable as that term is used in Smith. Instead, land use decisions often permit the sort of individualized assessment that Smith attributed to unemployment compensation decisions in which strict scrutiny might remain appropriate. RLUIPA itself specifically applies to government decision-making that permit individualized assessments as one of its jurisdictional bases. But insofar as that is the case, RLUIPA might not actually represent a change from what the Free Exercise standard would require anyway.

In any event, RLUIPA is certainly too narrow by itself to represent an answer to the issue of the proper limits and extent of religious exemptions in American public policy. The lesson of RLUIPA is that while Congress can legislate a generalized standard of protection of religious practice for purposes of federal law, it cannot do so with regard to state and local law. For that, the states themselves must act. To differing extents, the states have done so.


Christopher Lund’s 2010 article on State RFRA’s is a helpful starting point to see how State RFRA statutes have, or have not, filled the gap that federal legislation and the Constitution have left in the effort to promote religious exemptions. Lund’s article describes a variety of legislative and popular efforts. The state RFRA movement has reflected the changing national debate about religion in general and religious exemptions in particular.

Connecticut was the first state to enact any form of state RFRA, and it did so in the same year—1993—as the enactment of the federal

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234 See Pesick, supra note 228, at 385-86.
237 See generally Lund, State RFRAS, supra note 43.
238 See generally id.
Act.\textsuperscript{239} After that enactment, no other state enacted a RFRA until after Boerne's invalidation of the federal RFRA as it applied to states and local governments. Undoubtedly the enactment effort ceased at the state level because of the reliance by persons concerned about religious exemptions on the federal RFRA. As long as the federal Act was viewed as fully applicable to all levels of government, no State enactments were felt to be needed.

The effect of Boerne was to demonstrate the need for state RFRAs. In the two years after Boerne, 1998-2000, ten states passed RFRAs: Florida, Illinois, Rhode Island, Alabama (which amended its state constitution), Arizona, South Carolina, Texas, Idaho, New Mexico, and Oklahoma.\textsuperscript{240} In the years after 2000, another six states passed their versions of RFRA: Pennsylvania, Missouri, Virginia, Utah, Tennessee, and, most recently, Louisiana, in 2010.\textsuperscript{241}

At the same time, efforts to enact state RFRAs also failed in a number of states—in some of which the efforts later prevailed—most importantly in terms of numbers, in New York and in California, which still do not have state RFRAs.\textsuperscript{242} However, these numbers are misleading because, as will be seen in the next section, some of those non-enacting states have interpreted their state constitutions to provide greater protection for religious liberty than Smith would afford under the Free Exercise Clause.\textsuperscript{243} All in all, Lund estimates that around thirty states go beyond Smith in one way or another.\textsuperscript{244}

The structure of state RFRAs is basically the same as that of the federal Act, with a few important differences. The state acts all are triggered by some type of threshold showing of a burden on religious exercise either by the state or local governments.\textsuperscript{245} In most instances,
that burden is denominated substantial, but in some cases, a lesser triggering standard, such as a burden or even a restriction, is substituted. The state RFRAs then subject the government action to some form of compelling state interest test.

Other than the difference in the triggering standard, the biggest textual differences among state RFRAs concern exclusions from an act’s coverage—either total exclusions or areas in which a state RFRA does not require the full application of the compelling state interest test.\(^{246}\) The federal RFRA contains no coverage exclusions.\(^{247}\) As far as federal law and practices are concerned, all actions of the federal government are potentially subject to a RFRA challenge. But that is not the case at the state level.

Aside from the issue, raised above, of whether coverage exclusions render the exclusions non-neutral for purposes of Smith, the exclusions represent an important change in the conceptualization of religious liberty in America. An exclusion from coverage suggests that there are some areas in which it is felt that we either cannot afford to indulge religious liberty and/or that there are some areas in which claims of religious liberty are likely to be fabricated.

Prisoner claims exclusions are a good example of both concerns. There is an obvious concern that religious accommodations in prisons will be costly, both in simple dollar amounts, since there are many prisoners who might bring claims for expensive individual treatment, and costly in terms of the safety and security of the prisons themselves.\(^{248}\) In addition, there may be a feeling that prisoners are less sincere in their claims for religious exemptions, given the general hostility with which the interests of prisoners are often received.\(^{249}\)


\(^{248}\) See, e.g., Muhammad v. Crosby, 922 So. 2d 236 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2006) (Muslim prisoner objects to being clean-shaven; the court interprets his petition for writ of mandamus as one for declaratory relief and directs lower court to assess merits of the claim under chapter 761 on the issue of the length of a beard, not its existence, because a short beard does not raise security concerns).

\(^{249}\) See, e.g., Nelson v. Miller, 570 F.3d 868 (7th Cir. 2009) (Roman Catholic prisoner sought to have meatless meals every Friday of the year, but was denied permission because he could not “document” this as a requirement of his religion. He brought a claim under the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the First Amendment, RLUIPA, and the Illinois Religious Freedom Restoration Act (IRFRA). He lost at trial,
In light of the requirements of RLUIPA, RFRA prisoner exclusions might no longer be significant as a practical matter, since RLUIPA often applies the compelling state interest test to such claims. On the other hand, Justice Ginsburg’s opinion in Cutter seemed to suggest that RLUIPA might be applied deferentially in prisoner cases, indeed that the Establishment Clause might require that the Act be applied with due concern for the interests of other inmates and the institution itself.250

Of course, merely enacting RFRA does not say much about the actual level of protection of religious exemptions in these states. And the record in that regard is modest. First, and surprisingly, Lund reports that claims under these statutes “are exceedingly rare.”251 Second, when claims are brought, they are rarely successful.252 Lund attributes the first phenomenon in part to ignorance and inexperience by attorneys, who as nonspecialists, fail to bring the claims or bring them in the wrong courts.253 He attributes the lack of courtroom success to the failure of judges to properly interpret RFRA language that is before them.254 The result is that state RFRA “have not translated into a dependable source of protection at the state level.”255 They are “the dog that has not barked.”256

On the other hand, perhaps judges are properly interpreting state RFRA. Perhaps the states are already protecting religious liberty through statutory or administrative means to such an extent that the resulting accommodations are felt to be fair. Therefore, when religious exemptions claims are brought, they are viewed as non-meritori-

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250 Cutter v. Wilkinson, 544 U.S. 709, 723 (2005) (“Lawmakers supporting RLUIPA were mindful of the urgency of discipline, order, safety, and security in penal institutions. They anticipated that courts would apply the Act’s standard with ‘due deference to the experience and expertise of prison and jail administrators in establishing necessary regulations and procedures to maintain good order, security and discipline, consistent with consideration of costs and limited resources.’”).

251 Lund, State RFRA, supra note 43, at 467.

252 See id. at 468.

253 See id.

254 See id.

255 Id.

256 Id. at 469.
ous by objective observers, including judges. Lund doubts this.\(^{257}\) Given the public controversies today about the proper level of protection of religious claims to exemptions, so do I. It is hard to believe that the states are already providing the exemptions that people are arguing so vociferously about.

It seems more likely that the failure of RFRA claims stems from a disagreement in America concerning how much accommodation there should be for religious practices. That does not necessarily mean, as Lund argues, that the judges interpreting RFRA are improperly rejecting claims.\(^{258}\) It does probably mean, however, that state RFRA have not played the full role of protecting religious exemption claims that their drafters expected and hoped for.

We will consider the growing controversies about RFRA in Part III, in the context of recent issues in the religious exemptions debate. For now, let me note that in the spring of 2012, North Dakota rejected a proposed state RFRA constitutional amendment in a contest that revealed how politically divisive religious exemptions have become.\(^{259}\) That divisiveness has been growing for some time. When Governor Pete Wilson vetoed California’s RFRA in 1998, he warned against the danger that such statutes posed to a variety of important state policies, such as the payment of taxes and racial anti-discrimination laws.\(^{260}\) Whatever future role state RFRA play in the struggle over religious exemptions, the days of unanimous support for the religious dissenter exhibited in the early 1990s in light of *Smith* are clearly gone. The potential of state RFRA is now recognized by both supporters and opponents. It is just that potential for favoring religious exemptions that is rendering such statutes increasingly controversial.

5. **State Constitutional Interpretation**

The most obvious potential response at the state level to the Free Exercise approach of *Smith* is sometimes overlooked—a judicial interpretation of a parallel state constitutional provision that refuses to fol-

\(^{257}\) See id. at 467.

\(^{258}\) See id. at 468.


low Smith and retains some sort of heightened scrutiny for state and local government practices that interfere with religious exercise.

Every state constitution I know of has some kind of religion provision that could serve this purpose. No one doubts the legitimacy of “going beyond” federal constitutional requirements in the interpretation of state constitutions, which is a long-standing aspect of that field. Cutter demonstrated that retaining heightened scrutiny and permitting religious exemptions could be constitutional despite the Establishment Clause. And, as Lund points out, some states have gone ahead and interpreted their state constitutions to give greater protection to religious exercise than Smith does. In 2004, Douglas Laycock estimated that sixteen states apply a stricter standard than does Smith under a state constitutional provision equivalent to the Free Exercise Clause—though the rulings in three of those states predated Smith. So, given all of that, why have so many states bothered with the difficulty of passing state RFRAs? Why not just rely on judicial interpretation of the state constitution?

One obvious reason might be that Smith is persuasive and state courts interpreting their state constitutions have followed Smith’s interpretation. But only three states have actually followed Smith, so this seems an unlikely explanation.

My own state of Pennsylvania may furnish an explanation of the relative paucity of state constitutional response to Smith. Pennsylvania has a well-developed history and method for following, or not following, federal court interpretations of constitutional provisions that parallel those of the Pennsylvania Constitution. In addition to that tradition in general, Pennsylvania has a provision—Art. I, Section 3—that contains language that could be applied to a demand for religious

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261 See Robert F. Utter, State Constitutional Law, The United States Supreme Court, and Democratic Accountability: Is There a Crocodile in the Bathtub?, 64 WASH. L. REV. 19, 27-28 (1989) (noting “increase in state courts independently interpreting their state constitutions,” many law review articles and hundreds of state court decisions going beyond the requirements of federal constitutional law).


263 See Lund, State RFRAs, supra note 43, at 467.


exemption from a neutral, generally applicable law. However, because this provision had not been interpreted by the state supreme court to go beyond the requirements of the Free Exercise Clause—nor not to go beyond, for that matter—when confronted by that question, the lower state courts just assumed that federal interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause would control. When the state legislature enacted a state RFRA in 2002, there was no indication that the Pennsylvania courts would go beyond Smith.

The newly enacted statute now further affects Pennsylvania constitutional interpretation. Because of the enactment of a state RFRA, parties in cases about burdens on religious practice tend to raise issues pursuant to the state RFRA rather than under the state constitution simpliciter. Therefore, the question of whether Pennsylvania follows Smith may never be definitively resolved. This is significant because the Pennsylvania statute includes a number of exclusions and, of course, can be amended to provide more exclusions from its coverage. The more often the statute is relied upon, the less likely judges may be to impart independent significance to the state constitution in areas where the statute does not apply or applies deferentially.

Other states have different models of constitutional protections of religion and may use them to provide greater protection—or may shrink from doing so. But whatever the precise wording of the state constitutional provision, there is usually enough room for judicial in-

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267 Pa. Const. art. I, § 3 (“[N]o human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience . . . .”).
270 In a recent example, a federal district judge granted a preliminary injunction in August 2012 against a Philadelphia ban on public feeding in city parks under the Pennsylvania statute rather than any constitutional ground. See Howard Friedman, Opinion Filed Supporting Injunction Against Public Feeding in Parks, Religion Clause, Aug. 12, 2012, available at 2012 WLNR 17068444.
terpretation that rejects the *Smith* approach and provides some level of heightened scrutiny for claims of religious conscience.

What difference does it make whether states respond to *Smith* through state statutory enactment—including the possibility of amendments of a state constitution that would provide a higher level of scrutiny of burdens on religious practice—or whether this is done by a state’s judiciary under a general religion provision akin to the Free Exercise Clause? Eugene Volokh has written thoughtfully and creatively about the implications of different kinds of responses to *Smith*, and he concludes that a modified form of statutory response is best.\(^{274}\) I will return to his suggestion in Part V. For now, let me list the basic differences among the approaches that I have discussed in this part.

Obviously, a federal constitutional approach to religious exemptions would be the most protective, theoretically, of religious exemptions. The degree of that protection, however, would depend on the level of scrutiny that the Supreme Court and then the lower courts actually applied. *Hosanna-Tabor* shows that a federal constitutional interpretation is a clearly superior method of protecting religious practice if the Supreme Court is sufficiently committed to providing protection.\(^{275}\) On the other hand, the history of precedent prior to *Smith* strongly suggests that a weak level of protection by the Supreme Court is the worst situation for protecting religious liberty. The involvement of the Supreme Court prior to *Smith* more or less legitimated the failure of the federal Constitution to protect religious exemptions and inhibited any effort in Congress or the states to provide a greater level of protection. To that extent, and ironically, *Smith* was a boon to religious liberty since it unleashed efforts to create genuine protections for religious practice. As a practical matter, even if *Smith* is overruled, the issue of religious exemption is so difficult and varied that it is hard to imagine the Supreme Court dealing with it in a definitive way.

The next highest level of national protection of religious practice is Congressional legislation reaching the actions of government at all levels. But *Boerne* suggests that any such national legislation would


raise intractable federalism issues.\textsuperscript{276} Still, federal legislation in limited areas obviously can be helpful, as RLUIPA shows.

This leaves state action, either legislative or judicial. That distinction is itself overdrawn, since any state statute will be interpreted by the same state judiciary that would interpret a state constitutional provision. The advantage of a state constitutional interpretation requiring some level of heightened scrutiny for state and local government interferences with religious practices is that state legislatures would not be free to restrict religious exemptions for unpopular groups, such as inmates. On the other hand, it is not that much easier for a state supreme court to deal in a principled way with religious exemptions than it is for the United States Supreme Court, which is what led to the \textit{Smith} decision in the first place. So it is just as hard to imagine a state constitutional rule that deals effectively and broadly with the issue of religious exemptions.

This part of the article has described what the situation for religious exemptions was like until relatively recently. The next part will describe the increasingly divisive debate that is now occurring around the issue of religious exemptions.

III. The Current Debate Over Religious Exemptions

The current debate over religious exemptions reflects politicization underlain by growing and deep mistrust between believers and nonbelievers and, increasingly, between liberals and conservatives, whether religious or not. Exemptions for religion have become a partisan issue in the presidential election that is going on as I write this in the summer of 2012. Religious exemptions have become a symbol in the controversy over the status of religion generally in America. I will show instances of these currents and trends, but probably the reader is already aware that the media are filled with signs of these events.

First and foremost in the current debate is the controversy over the religious exemption to the contraception requirements of the ACA.\textsuperscript{277} The ACA has had a contentious political history as concerns religion from its beginning. The first contested issue was abortion.

\textsuperscript{276} See City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507 (1997).

\textsuperscript{277} The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty estimates that there are 61 cases and over 200 plaintiffs challenging the contraception mandate as of spring 2013. See HHS Mandate Information Central, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, http://www.becketfund.org/hhsinformationcentral/ (last visited June 25, 2013).
Claims have been made that the ACA and its implementing regulations fund abortions.\textsuperscript{278} Most independent observers have rejected that claim, except insofar as the ACA does cover the Hyde Amendment exceptions—rape, incest, and abortions to protect the life of the mother.\textsuperscript{279}

In contrast to the abortion issue, there never was any question that there is a mandate in the ACA and its implementing regulations requiring contraception coverage without co-pays and exempting certain religious organizations from that mandate.\textsuperscript{280} The problem for religious groups was always the scope of that exemption. According to Richard Garnett, as implemented originally, the exemption “cover[ed] only those entities whose purpose is ‘the inculcation of religious values’ and that hire and serve primarily people of the same religious faith. A house of worship or a seminary could meet this definition, but many religious charities, schools and hospitals would not.”\textsuperscript{281}

President Obama later offered an expansion of the exemption in which insurance companies serving objecting religious employers would have to themselves offer the contraception coverage instead of the religious employer. But it remains unclear what relief this proposed expansion would give to a religious hospital or university that self-insures, and the details of the proposed expansion have not yet been worked out. Lawsuits have been filed challenging the original religious exemption in the meantime.\textsuperscript{282} Even some allies of the Obama Administration have called for further expansion of this religious exemption.

\textsuperscript{278} I receive political fundraising messages about this almost every day. Here is the opening of one such from Jay Sekulow, Chief Counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice on Wednesday, July 4, 2012: “The fight against ObamaCare – the pro-abortion tax increase, the abortion-pill mandate, and the abortion surcharge – is far from over.”

\textsuperscript{279} See Does Barack Obama’s Health Care Bill Include $1 Abortions?, TAMPA BAY TIMES (Mar. 12, 2012), http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/mar/21/blog-posting/does-barack-obamas-health-care-bill-include-1-abor/. This report does not cover the availability of the so-called “morning after pill” and whether such emergency contraceptives are abortion agents in any sense of the word. In any event, many such contraceptives are available without prescription and are ineligible for coverage anyway.


\textsuperscript{282} Including a lawsuit by Notre Dame. See id.
Of more significance to the issues raised in this article is the intensity of the rhetoric that the contraception mandate, and opposition to it, has generated. The issue has become a part of two countervailing narratives: the war on women and the war on religion.

Neither response seems justified. The Catholic Church has consistently opposed birth control for the faithful, so it is not surprising that Catholic institutions would object to offering contraception coverage in their insurance policies.283 Their objection is not aimed only at contraception for women. Nor is it a newly minted dogma aimed at frustrating the ACA.

On the other hand, as Rick Ungar pointed out on Forbes’s blog, over 50 percent of Americans already live in states that require health insurance companies to provide contraception in their policy offerings. Further, states like California, New York and North Carolina have the identical religious exemptions as have been promulgated by the Department of Health & Human Services while some states (Wisconsin, Colorado and Georgia) provide no religious exemption whatsoever. Thus, one wonders why religious organizations in these states have not previously raised a fuss.284

So, the requirement of contraception coverage is also not new, is not part of a war on religion, and was always subject to possible further compromise.

Notwithstanding these moderating considerations, the rhetoric on the subject of contraception has been extremely vituperative. Here are just two examples on one side, which the reader probably knows could be endlessly repeated. Sally Quinn, the well-known Washington Post reporter, wrote in April 2012 about “A Catholic ‘war on women’” that linked Vatican criticism of The Leadership Conference of Women Re-


284 Rick Unger, The Truth About Contraception, Obamacare and the Church, Forbes (Feb. 2, 2012, 2:45 PM), http://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2012/02/02/the-truth-about-contraception-obamacare-and-the-church/. It is true that there are ways “to get around the mandate” in these states, as a critical USA Today editorial stated, but that might well turn out to be true of the federal mandate as well. The point is that the sort of behind-the-scenes negotiations one would expect exploded into open opposition. See 160-Plus Bishops Speak Out Against HHS Mandate, Nat’l Cath. Reg. (Feb. 7, 2012), http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/hhs-decision-prompts-more-opposition-from-catholics/.
religious, the most prominent U.S. Catholic nuns group, with the contraception debate and the pedophilia crisis:

It’s no wonder so many Catholics are leaving the church. They go longing for spirituality and they get dogma. A young friend of mine raised Catholic by nuns, wanted to return to the church and decided to go Easter Sunday. In the end she couldn’t go, she said, because by walking into the church she felt she would be condoning the handling of the sexual abuse scandal, health care reform, the issues of contraception, abortion rights (even in the case of the life of the mother) and gay marriage.285

At around the same time, the Editorial Board of the New Jersey Star-Ledger went one step further, claiming that Vatican criticism of American nuns was “political payback” because some of the nuns had initially accepted the Obama Administration compromise that expanded the religious exemption to contraception coverage.286 This last example gives a nice flavor of the attribution of political partisanship that has now become a part of the secular critique of religion.287

Of course, the rhetoric has escalated on the other side as well. One example on the pro-religion side is Todd Starnes’ book Dispatches from Bitter America288 (the title is a play on the quote from candidate Obama in 2008, which is now itself a part of the religious/nonreligious divide289). Starnes is a commentator on FOX News. He said in an interview in April 2012 that the Obama Administration’s “War on Christianity,” which includes the contraception mandate and much more, is aimed at turning America into a secular state, which cannot be done without undermining God in American culture:

I suspect if you look at what the [Obama] administration is doing, they want to turn us into one of these godless, European, secular states . . .

288 See generally Todd STARNES, DISPATCHES FROM BITTER AMERICA: A GUN-TOTING, CHICKEN EATING SON OF A BAPTIST’S CULTURE WAR STORIES (2012).
289 Obama: “Small Town Voters Are Bitter, Cling to Guns & God,” YOU DECIDE POLITICS (Apr. 12, 2008, 1:05 PM), http://www.youdecidepolitics.com/2008/04/12/obama-says-small-town-voters-are-bitter-cling-to-guns-god/ (“So it’s not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”).
how can you do that if you have a country that is so in tune with understanding that God is the foundation for this country?\footnote{Billy Hallowell, Exclusive: Fox News’ Todd Starnes Breaks Down the Obama Admin’s ‘War on Religious Liberty,’ THE BLAZE (Apr. 9, 2012, 7:47 AM), http://www.theblaze.com/stories/exclusive-fox-news-todd-starnes-breaks-down-the-obama-admins-war-on-religious-liberty/.
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As another example, under the headline, “Catholic Bishops Call for Two Weeks of Action Against Obama,” CathNewsUSA ran this first paragraph on April 25, 2012: “Roman Catholic leaders are calling for two weeks of public protests against President Barack Obama’s policies as they intensify their argument that the administration is engaged in a war on religion.”\footnote{Catholic Bishops Call For Two Weeks of Action Against Obama, CATHNEWS USA (Apr. 25, 2012, 6:22 AM), http://www.cathnewsusa.com/2012/04/catholic-bishops-call-for-two-weeks-of-action-against-obama/.
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The rhetoric has become so heated that there have also been reports that some Bishops feel the campaign against the contraception mandate, including lawsuits filed in May 2012, has become too much a part of the political debate and have sought to soften the Church’s position, or at least its perceived position.\footnote{Moderate Bishops Upset About Health Care Lawsuits, CATHNEWS USA (May 29, 2012, 3:28 AM), http://www.cathnewsusa.com/2012/05/moderate-bishops-angry-about-health-care-lawsuits/.
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The contraception debate is only the most recent and publicly-noted issue concerning religious exemptions. Two other recent examples—the North Dakota referendum about a state RFRA constitutional amendment and growing anti-circumcision sentiment—also show the increasing controversy around religious exemptions.

The North Dakota amendment campaign illustrated two trends. First, the demands by supporters of the RFRA amendment have increased since the original RFRA was passed in 1993. Thus, the North Dakota provision would have been triggered by a mere burden on religious liberty.\footnote{See Dave Thompson, North Dakota ‘Religious Liberty’ Measure Sparks Debate, NPR (June 5, 2012, 2:56 AM), http://www.npr.org/2012/06/05/154285336/n-dakota-religious-liberty-measure-sparks-debate.
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In addition, the amendment would have extended its protection to indirect burdens, such as exclusions from access to facilities.\footnote{Marci A. Hamilton, North Dakota’s Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) Signals Religious Lobbyists’ New and Disturbing Approach to Statute-based Free Exercise Rights, JUSTIA (May 3, 2012), http://verdict.justia.com/2012/05/03/north-dakotas-religious-freedom-
}
opposition to religious exemptions. Here is my favorite illustrative quote by the accomplished polemicist Marci Hamilton:

> The longer the federal RFRA was in place, the clearer it became that while the law was perhaps well-intentioned, it harbored a dark underside, for under the law, children could be abused and medically neglected simply because those who were harming them or putting them at risk were religious. Residential neighborhoods could be subjected to uses never contemplated when the owners purchased their homes; and religious actors could argue that they were not bound by just about any law governing everyone else.295

In terms of the anti-circumcision movement, in July 2011, a California superior court judge removed an anti-circumcision initiative from the ballot on state preemption grounds.296 And, in 2012, a German court was reported to have rendered an anti-circumcision decision, although the nature of the ruling is still unclear.297

Any ban on circumcision would be viewed as an existential threat by Jews and other believers with religious commitments to circumcision. Some of the circumcision opponents seem to question whether there is any value for a child in membership in an ongoing religious community, and these critics seem ready to invite the government to second-guess a parental decision to circumcise a child based on a standard of whether circumcision is medically necessary.298 Presumably, circumcision for religious purposes is never medically necessary as such.

Yet, even within this increasingly divisive debate about religious exemptions, it is fair to ask why religious authorities reacted as strongly as they did to the contraception mandate in the ACA. Why did the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops feel it necessary to proclaim a Fortnight for Freedom, with references to Christian martyrs, in

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295 Id.
the primary context of the mandate. After all, nothing about the contraception mandate was final, and the Obama Administration certainly had not closed off further discussion. Nor, for all the rhetoric, does the contraception mandate come close to previous American restraints on the religious liberty of Catholics. During the Vietnam War, for example, the draft laws refused to recognize the Catholic Just War doctrine, thus leaving sincere Catholics with the choice of killing in a war deemed unjust—a powerful violation of religious conscience—or going to jail. Surely that situation represented a more direct challenge to religious conscience than the indirect association with contraception the mandate represents. Yet, the Catholic Church never rose up to challenge this denial of recognition of the Just War theory in anything like the terms with which it has reacted to the contraception mandate.

I reject a purely political answer to this question—that the Bishops, and conservative religious leaders generally, are opposed to the worldview of the Obama Administration and are looking for ways to express that opposition and, if possible, defeat it in the November 2012 election. No doubt there is some of that, which has led to further criticism of the Bishops, but I believe something deeper is going on.

When the Vietnam draft cases were being decided, religion in America enjoyed overwhelming, widespread cultural endorsement. That is no longer the case, and it may be that the defensiveness that has emerged in the religious response to the Obama Administration is not aimed at the contraception mandate by itself, or even in combination with other particular controversies, such as the eligibility of Catholic adoption agencies for public funding in light of their opposition to adoption by same-sex couples. It may be that religious groups and authorities are attempting to defend a general role for religion in the culture that they sense is under attack. That is, they are asserting that religion is central to the culture, is good and is uniquely valuable.

301 For the degree of the change and the status of religion in the 1950s and 60s, see generally Ross Douthat, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics (2012).
302 These were essentially the sentiments of Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia in his address to the annual gathering of Catholic leaders hosted by the Napa
That view of religion as uniquely valuable is under attack, not just by the small minority that argues that religion is actively harmful—a Richard Dawkins, for example, who calls all religious education child abuse—but by a much larger group, well represented in the legal academy, that argues that religion is no different from any other normative commitment that a nonreligious person might have and should therefore receive no greater protection in terms of exemptions from general law than secular moral pursuits would receive.

This position—that religion is not special—need not imply that religion is bad. But it does oppose special exemptions for religious beliefs that many religious believers not only take for granted, but also assume that the Free Exercise Clause requires, Smith notwithstanding.

The argument that religion is not special is the position that Brian Leiter was representing when he asked provocatively, Why Tolerate Religion?, in which he argued that we should tolerate deeply held claims of conscience, but that religion should not be singled out as especially deserving of respect and protection. Leiter’s question would be an-Institute on July 26, 2012: “[A] growing secularism and the loss of a moral foundation suggest that ‘America is becoming a very different country.’” Michelle Bauman, As Secularism Spreads, Archbishop Chaput Charts Path for Renewal, CATH. NEWS AGENCY (July 27, 2012, 12:32 AM), http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/as-secularism-spreads-archbishop-chaput-charts-path-for-renewal/.

Steven Smith gives the flavor of the growing threat that some religious believers feel: “Some people – some intelligent, informed people – believe there are emerging, serious threats to religious freedom.” Steven D. Smith, Religious Freedom and Its Enemies, or Why the Smith Decision May Be a Greater Loss Now Than It Was Then, 32 CARDOZO L. REV. 2033, 2042 (2011) (emphasis in original).


See, e.g., Christopher L. Eisgruber & Lawrence G. Sager, Why the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is Unconstitutional, 69 N.Y.U. L. REV. 437, 454-55 (1994) (asserting in pertinent part that “RFRA’s compelling state interest test privileges religious believers by giving them an ill-defined and potentially sweeping right to claim exemption from generally applicable laws, while comparably serious secular commitments – such as those flowing from parental obligation, philosophical conviction, or lifelong cultural practice – receive no such legal solicitude. RFRA is thus a clear instance of the favoritism condemned by the Court’s decisions in Thornton and Texas Monthly.”).

swered by religious\textsuperscript{306} and nonreligious\textsuperscript{307} defenses of the uniqueness of religious liberty. Today, the equal status position for nonreligious commitments is argued by a number of legal theorists,\textsuperscript{308} and the debate is ongoing.

Perhaps the fullest recent elucidation of the issue of religion’s uniqueness was a November 2011 debate at Georgetown University Law Center between Michael McConnell and Noah Feldman concerning whether religious liberty is special.\textsuperscript{309} Feldman claimed that the presence of protections for religion in the Constitution is merely a historical contingency and challenged McConnell to justify normatively the claimed special status of religion—by which Feldman was referring generally to the debate over religious exemptions.\textsuperscript{310} From Feldman’s perspective, whatever protections religious institutions might enjoy under a case like \textit{Hosanna-Tabor} should be enjoyed by institutions associated with other morally serious commitments, such as the Sierra Club or the Federalist Society, and if \textit{Smith} is to be superseded by statutory protections for religion, such as RFRAs, those protections should also be available to non-religious claims of conscience.\textsuperscript{311}

We have now come to the present moment. We have seen in this part that the issue of religious exemptions is actually a debate about religion itself: How important is religion? How does the value of religion compare to the values of the generally applicable laws that religious believers seek exemption from? How are these values to be adjusted? And where should the presumptions lie?

The situation we are in is that the meaning of religion—both its role in our culture, as well as its definition—is in play in America today. We are engaged in a struggle over how religion should be treated.

\textsuperscript{306} See, e.g., E. Gregory Wallace, \textit{Justifying Religious Freedom: The Western Tradition}, 114 PENN ST. L. REV. 485, 491 (2009). ("My thesis is that the First Amendment’s protection of religious freedom must rest preeminently on the intrinsic character and claims of religion itself. Religion requires special constitutional treatment precisely because it involves something transcendent, objective, normative, and exclusive.").

\textsuperscript{307} See, e.g., Laycock, \textit{Free Exercise of Religion}, supra note 221.


\textsuperscript{310} See id.

\textsuperscript{311} See id.
That struggle is deeply political, by which I mean that it is a struggle to define the good for our society. No one can predict with confidence how this struggle will end.

But before trying to predict the outcome, let me next ask a different question: What is the meaning of this struggle? What does it mean when a constitutional Republic tries to define a constitutional value primarily without reference to the Supreme Court? In this debate, are we all interpreting the Constitution? Or are we doing something else? And if we are interpreting the Constitution, what does that imply about constitutional democracy?

IV. What is the Meaning of Our Struggle Over Religious Exemptions?

What is the meaning for constitutional democracy of the struggle over religious exemptions that I have been describing? If religious liberty is constitutionally protected, why is the Supreme Court not simply doing its job of protecting that right under the Free Exercise Clause as it protects other constitutional rights? We don’t usually “experiment” in such matters. We don’t pass statutes or vote in referenda. We don’t protect constitutional liberty to one extent in one state and to another extent elsewhere. How do we explain the struggle over religious exemptions in a way that enforces rather than undermines the Constitution?

Let me state my conclusion upfront. There are some decisions that only the People can make. I have said that before, in the context of the Establishment Clause.\textsuperscript{312} I did not realize then that the Free Exercise issue of exemptions is part of the same context as is the Establishment Clause issue.

America and the Western world in general are in a transition period regarding religion, both in regard to its private meaning and its public role. In Europe, this transition is being contaminated by anti-Muslim sentiment. In America, fortunately, that problem is a marginal issue, the manic fear of Shari’ah notwithstanding.\textsuperscript{313}

\textsuperscript{312} See Bruce Ledewitz, Church, State, and the Crisis in American Secularism ch. 3 (2011)

\textsuperscript{313} For a contrast of the American and European approaches to religious liberty, particularly in regard to Islam, see Martha C. Nussbaum, The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age (2012). Despite instances of religious intolerance in America, the comparison is much in America’s favor.
This transition is from a society completely and even unconsciously dominated by religion—and by Christianity in particular—to something else. We are grappling with Ronald Dworkin’s horrible but perhaps accurate statement of the nature of the question. Dworkin says, and many people on both sides agree with him, that the fundamental question is who we are as a nation. The following is how Dworkin posed the basic issue about religion in his book Is Democracy Possible Here?:

Should we be a religious nation, collectively committed to values of faith and worship, but with tolerance for religious minorities including nonbelievers? Or should we be a nation committed to thoroughly secular government but with tolerance and accommodation for people of religious faith? A religious nation that tolerates nonbelief? Or a secular nation that tolerates religion?

This transition is not simply from religious to secular, though that is one possible future. The transition is actually from settled consensus to open contest. Pro-religion forces in our culture still dominate. But they do not dominate everywhere—not in the legal academy, for example, where anti-religious sentiment has surfaced in the last few years. And they do not dominate anywhere the way they used to.

The Supreme Court is simply unable to resolve a fundamental issue like this. Indeed, even calling the question of religion an “issue” understates its breadth and depth. The context is somewhat like that to which Justice Holmes alluded in his famous dissent in Lochner v. New York, the case that ushered in judicial resistance to the burgeoning social welfare state. Right at the start of his dissent, Holmes identified the deep context of the case:

314 See generally Dworkin, supra note 10.
315 Id. at 56 (emphasis added). For a recent effort to soften this harsh dualism with a more nuanced one, see generally Whose God Rules? Is the United States a Secular Nation or a Theological Democracy? (Nathan C. Walker & Edwin J. Greenlee eds., 2011).
318 198 U.S. 45 (1905) (striking down a New York statute forbidding employment in a bakery for more than 60 hours a week or 10 hours a day).
This case is decided upon an economic theory which a large part of the country does not entertain. If it were a question whether I agreed with that theory, I should desire to study it further and long before making up my mind. But I do not conceive that to be my duty, because I strongly believe that my agreement or disagreement has nothing to do with the right of a majority to embody their opinions in law. It is settled by various decisions of this court that state constitutions and state laws may regulate life in many ways which we as legislators might think as injudicious, or if you like as tyrannical, as this, and which, equally with this, interfere with the liberty to contract. Sunday laws and usury laws are ancient examples. A more modern one is the prohibition of lotteries. The liberty of the citizen to do as he likes so long as he does not interfere with the liberty of others to do the same, which has been a shibboleth for some well-known writers, is interfered with by school laws, by the Post Office, by every state or municipal institution which takes his money for purposes thought desirable, whether he likes it or not. The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s Social Statics.\footnote{Id. at 75 (Holmes, J., dissenting).}

By that reference to Spencer, Holmes was criticizing the Court majority for taking a side in the fundamental debate over the future of economic life in America. It would take the country thirty years to throw off the Court’s premature attempt in \textit{Lochner} to resolve that debate.

The recognition that the Supreme Court was not the proper arena in which to make that fundamental economic decision is what renders some conservative reaction to \textit{National Federation}, the recent decision upholding the ACA, so absurd.\footnote{See generally Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus. v. Sebelius, 132 S. Ct. 2566 (2012).} Some of that reaction seemed to be disappointment that the Court had not repealed the New Deal. John Yoo’s op-ed in the \textit{Wall Street Journal}, in which he likened Chief Justice Roberts to Chief Justice Hughes, who, Yoo asserted, switched his vote on New Deal issues to avoid the FDR Court-packing plan, illustrates this outlandish disappointment:

After the president’s plan was announced, Hughes and Justice Owen J. Roberts began to switch their positions. They would vote to uphold the National Labor Relations Act, minimum-wage and maximum-hour laws, and the rest of the New Deal.

But Hughes sacrificed fidelity to the Constitution’s original meaning in order to repel an attack on the court. Like Justice Roberts, Hughes blessed the modern welfare state’s expansive powers and unaccountable bureaucracies—the very foundations for ObamaCare.\footnote{John Yoo, \textit{Chief Justice Roberts and His Apologists}, \textit{Wall. St. J.} (June 29, 2012, 7:32 PM), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014240527023035615045774965200011395292.html.}
Yoo still thinks that it was the Court’s job to head off the 20th century social welfare state.\textsuperscript{322} Like others who claim to worship at the altar of original meaning, he does not acknowledge that his method is not value neutral, but represents a fundamental political choice to be made by judges rather than voters.\textsuperscript{323} Holmes was right. Decisions that fundamental cannot be made by the Supreme Court, then or now.

It is true that every important constitutional decision takes a side in a national debate of some kind. Justice Scalia sounded just like Holmes in \textit{Lawrence}—the case that struck down anti-sodomy criminal laws—when Scalia accused the majority of “tak[ing] sides in the culture war.”\textsuperscript{324} And the same could be said of Justice Scalia’s majority gun rights opinion in \textit{Heller}.\textsuperscript{325} The Court is always going to be resolving contentious issues.

I do not have a formula for when the Court can properly decide controversial questions versus when such a decision is beyond its proper role. But the fundamental economic arrangement of the country is one decision that is beyond its competence, and the place of religion in American life is another.

So, the tension I allude to in the title of this article about experimenting with a constitutional value is an inevitable one. Something about religious liberty is protected by the Constitution. In certain limited contexts, such as the ministerial exception or discrimination against religion, the Supreme Court is willing to say what that level of protection is. But, as to the more general question of religious exemptions, the Court is allowing a national experiment, or series of experiments, to unfold. And there is really no alternative to resolving matters in this popular way.

Having said this, I now must look more closely at what the Court has actually done in the religion field. Not everyone would accept my description that the Court has abandoned the field of religion under the Constitution.

In terms of the Establishment Clause, the Court has made it increasingly difficult, recently, for plaintiffs to challenge certain kinds of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{322} Id. \\
\textsuperscript{323} Id. \\
\textsuperscript{324} Lawrence v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558, 602 (2003) (Scalia, J., dissenting). \\
\end{flushleft}
government actions that allegedly endorse or support religion. But this precedential line cannot be called a simple abandonment of the field because the Court’s previous decisions requiring government neutrality toward religion have not been overruled. Those decisions still control in contexts in which standing is present, such as cases about religion in the classroom and cases in which state courts grant standing in federal constitutional litigation. More importantly, those prior cases influence the national debate over religious imagery in the public square. Because of them, governments rarely admit that they are endorsing religion and often claim, perhaps disingenuously, that they are merely advertent to historical usages or mere patriotism. The ghost of prior Supreme Court jurisprudence haunts our debates over the Pledge of Allegiance, the national motto and all the rest. That is not simple abandonment.

In terms of Smith, and Free Exercise in general, it is even more inaccurate to characterize the Court’s action as simple abandonment. In Smith, the Court decided what the Free Exercise Clause means, or at least what it does not mean. Smith decided that the Free Exercise Clause does not protect religiously-based exemptions from neutral, generally applicable law. And when Congress expressly disagreed with that judgment, the Court in Boerne found Congress’s disagreement unconstitutional, pursuant to a form of judicial constitutional supremacy.

This way of looking at Smith and Boerne is the reason that Marci Hamilton stated baldly in 1998 that The Religious Freedom Restoration Act is Unconstitutional, Period. The problem with RFRA, and by extension the problem with all the efforts that are going on to promote religious exemptions, is that Congress, the states, and all of us are “[e]xpropriat[ing] the Supreme Court’s Constitutional Duty to Interpret the First Amendment.” And, if the reader is of the view that this “duty” to interpret is actually shared among all these entities, then the

328 Id. at 879.
331 Id. at 3.
criticism can be strengthened to say that all of the efforts described above are a repudiation of what the Court held the Free Exercise Clause meant in Smith. It is certainly noteworthy that so much of society is attempting to reverse a Supreme Court decision other than through amendment of the Constitution.

This criticism that we are undermining constitutional democracy cannot be brushed aside by the mere fact that the Court invited legislative action in Smith and accepted legislative action in O Centro.\textsuperscript{332} The question of why legislatures are permitted to disagree with the Court’s constitutional interpretation remains.

Nor does the obvious reality that Congress has “corrected” past Supreme Court decisions that did not protect certain rights by passing legislation to provide for those rights answer the question of why this is permissible.\textsuperscript{333} Is the Court supreme in the exposition of the Constitution or not?\textsuperscript{334}

When Congress legislates a right that the Court has failed to protect, Congress might be of the view that the right should be protected as a matter of policy even if it lacks constitutional dimension. But in the context of religious exemptions, Congress and everyone else is second-guessing the Court’s constitutional judgment itself. Liberals would not be so sanguine if Congress were of the view that the Court had misinterpreted the First Amendment in Hill v. Colorado\textsuperscript{335} and tried to ban bubble laws around abortion clinics. Nor would conservatives be so sanguine if Congress required corporations to seek a shareholder vote before engaging in political speech out of the view that the Court erred in Citizens United v. F.E.C.\textsuperscript{336} Suddenly, judicial supremacy in the interpretation of the Constitution would seem important.

Whatever one concludes about the authority of the Court in matters of constitutional interpretation, I do not think that Smith necessarily raises that issue, even though Boerne did protect the States from Congress’s attempt to go beyond Smith.\textsuperscript{337} When Justice Scalia described religious peyote exemptions as involving a constitutional


\textsuperscript{334} Compare id., with Cooper v. Aaron, 358 U.S. 1, 18 (1958).

\textsuperscript{335} 530 U.S. 703 (2000).


“value,” he was effectively acknowledging that the rule announced in Smith does not enforce the entirety of Free Exercise:

Values that are protected against government interference through enshrinement in the Bill of Rights are not thereby banished from the political process. Just as a society that believes in the negative protection accorded to the press by the First Amendment is likely to enact laws that affirmatively foster the dissemination of the printed word, so also a society that believes in the negative protection accorded to religious belief can be expected to be solicitous of that value in its legislation as well. It is therefore not surprising that a number of States have made an exception to their drug laws for sacramental peyote use.338

Logically, Justice Scalia’s interpretation of the Free Exercise “value” should have meant that Congress could recognize the contours of the constitutional value more fully under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment, which Boerne denied Congress could do.339 But, notwithstanding Boerne, the language in Smith about a value enshrined in the Bill of Rights remains.340

Smith should be thought of as a case of constitutional underenforcement.341 As noted above, Justice Scalia argued in Smith that judicial enforcement of religious exemptions in a diverse society would threaten other constitutional values.342 Justice Scalia thus seemed to admit that the question of religious adjustment could not be resolved by judges alone, or even primarily by judges. That political and social reality, not some purely interpretive ground, is what Smith was about. Given constitutional underenforcement, it becomes more defensible that society seeks its own understanding of Free Exercise.

I do not wish to be seen as understating just how radical the popular struggle over religious exemptions is as a matter of constitutional theory. The involvement of legislatures, administrators, and voters, as well as judges, in working out the meaning of religious liberty in the context of struggles over religious exemptions goes considerably beyond what is usually referred to as popular constitutionalism. In Larry

338 Smith II, 494 U.S. at 890 (citations omitted).
339 See id.; Boerne, 521 U.S. 507.
342 See Smith II, 494 U.S. 872.
Kramer’s understanding, popular constitutionalism tends to emphasize the right of the people to overrule, in effect, judicial decisions with which they disagree.343 In Barry Friedman’s understanding, popular constitutionalism describes a “dialogue” between the people and the Supreme Court, in which, eventually, “the Constitution comes to reflect the considered judgment of the American people.”344

The context of religious exemptions, on the other hand, goes beyond all that and seems to reflect a free-for-all rather than an appeal or a dialogue. Our current practices have more in common with the question proposed by Mark Tushnet, whether we ought to get rid of judicial review.345 In the area of religion, we are in effect putting Tushnet’s insights to the test. And if I am right that some fundamental national decisions can only be made in this way, with input from a variety of sources on a truly national scale not preempted by the Supreme Court, then in retrospect, Boerne may only mean that the Court would not allow even Congress to short-circuit a messy national process that must play out in numerous contexts. Boerne thus becomes more of a federalism case protecting the experiments going on in the state laboratories and less a case about judicial supremacy.

In the next part, I ask, what is going to emerge out of this free-for-all? What is the likely future of religious exemptions? And, most importantly, what is at stake, religiously, in this struggle?

V. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS?

In 1999, Professor Eugene Volokh suggested that a common law model for religious exemptions would work better than either the constitutional exemption model of Sherbert or the statutory exemption model of Smith.346 Acknowledging his debt to Guido Calabresi’s neglected 1982 work, A Common Law for the Age of Statutes,347 Volokh proposed that RFRAs be rewritten to drop the heightened scrutiny standard and become, essentially, grants of jurisdiction over religious exemptions that judges would work out at their discretion, subject to

345 See generally Mark Tushnet, Taking the Constitution Away from the Courts (1999).
346 Volokh, Common-Law Model, supra note 274.
347 Id. at 1477, 1477 n.30.
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legislative override. The whole design, and particularly the “tough calls,” would be “governed by the political process” just as the common law system was.

It was an ingenious suggestion. The basic inadequacy in it, however, was that Volokh’s solution was technical and flexible. It aimed to resolve the problem of how to manage a system of religious exemptions from generally applicable laws.

It turned out that the question of religious exemptions was not the technical one of informed judgment. Rather, the problem was more fundamental—whether the American legal system should recognize religious exemptions at all and why? Answering that question requires all of the modes of decision that Volokh wanted to supersede and some others as well: constitutional interpretation, statutory enactments, public referenda, and even just informed public debate.

The struggle over religious exemptions is one of the ways that this society engages Dworkin’s question—are we to be a religious nation or a secular one? But even Dworkin’s question does not adequately gauge the stakes involved in the debate over religious exemptions. For Dworkin assumes that in whatever direction America goes—whether toward the secular or the religious—the principle of mutual respect will govern. In particular, he assumes that a secular society, which is what he hopes we will become, will readily grant accommodation—exemptions in our context here—to the religious believer. But, as we have seen, the question of whether to do that and the question of the burden of proof, so to speak, to show that a religious exemption is needed and justified, are very much at issue. There is actually a great deal of suspicion of religion among some of the nonreligious.

I think that Professor Michael Stokes Paulsen has a better grasp of the current debate when he describes four “Stances Toward Religious Freedom.” Religious freedom in Paulsen’s parlance is essentially the issue of exemptions. The four stances, as I denominate them, are:

348 Compare the grant of jurisdiction to federal courts in the Labor Management Act, 29 U.S.C. § 185(a) (2013), which has been interpreted as authorizing the federal courts to develop a common law of labor-management relations, with Textile Workers Union of Am. v. Lincoln Mills of Ala., 353 U.S. 448 (1957).
349 Volokh, Common-Law Model, supra note 274, at 1469.
350 See generally id.
352 See id. at 1191-93.
religion, religious intolerance, religious tolerance out of religious conviction, religious tolerance out of secular skepticism, and secular religious intolerance.353

The crucial difference among these stances concerns their views of religious truth. In the first two categories, society judges that religious truth exists, but differs on whether the government should be authorized to enforce religious truth.354 The pre-liberal stance answered that question affirmatively, and minority believers were therefore persecuted.355 The religious tolerance stance—the liberal position and in Paulsen’s view the assumption of our constitutional founding—is that government cannot be so trusted, and so a strong presumption of religious exemption is embedded in the second stance and in the Constitution.356

The latter two stances assume the reverse—that religious truth does not exist but that believers believe otherwise.357 The third stance—tolerant secular skepticism—protects religious liberty not because religious claims are true, but because many people continue to believe them and individual autonomy is prized.358 The fourth stance of secular intolerance, however, is intolerant in its presumptions about religion.359 There is little tolerance for religious exemptions because religion is not viewed as beneficent and the norms of the state generally take precedence over the demands of religious conscience.

One can see Paulsen’s categories at work in an imagined debate over the issue of male circumcision.360 From the point of view of religious intolerance, the Christian State would ban male circumcision on the ground that God has determined otherwise and that Jewish or Muslim holdouts are violating God’s will for humanity. In religious tolerance premised on the truth of religion, circumcision is really not the State’s concern at all. The religious believer decides whether circumcision of a child is required. From the point of view of tolerant secular

353 See id. at 1164-65.
354 See id. at 1164.
355 See id. at 1166.
356 See id. at 1167.
357 See id. at 1164.
358 See id. at 1170.
359 See id. at 1178.
360 This is by no means merely a thought experiment. Just such a debate has been going on in a number of Internet venues, in and out of law, for the last few weeks as I write this article in the summer of 2012. I am not intentionally quoting anyone here, but most of the positions I am setting forth have been represented in those debates.
skepticism, circumcision is undoubtedly permitted, since there is no real showing of harm to the child, and the consequences of a ban on the religious communities involved would be extraordinary and would provoke resistance. But in secular religious intolerance, the standard to be applied would be the best interest of the child and the autonomy of the child. To claim religious exemption, the believer would have to show that there is essentially no harm from circumcision and no feelings of resentment later by the children affected. This standard probably could not be met and circumcision would thus be banned.

This exercise demonstrates the unrealistic premises of some thinking about religious exemptions. Actually banning circumcision would lead to a phenomenal backlash that would succeed in enacting a constitutional amendment protecting circumcision, and perhaps protecting more than circumcision. Furthermore, despite a tone of dispassion in the discussions I have read about this issue, this exercise also demonstrates just how much hostility there is against religion among some secularists. Considering the harm that some parents in other contexts do to their children, such as plastic surgery on young girls, even discussing the propriety of male circumcision suggests a bias against religion rather than a primary concern for the welfare of the child.

The situation regarding circumcision is somewhat akin to a comparison between the pedophilia controversy that has beset the Roman Catholic Church and the Penn State University sex abuse scandal, and the revelations in The New York Times about sexual abuse and cover-ups at an elite prep school.361 The former has led to questions about the Church as a whole, but the latter two instances have not raised questions generally about sexual abuse in children-oriented nonprofits or led to investigations of sexual abuse at other prep schools, even though we all know that there is such abuse in these other contexts. Sexual abuse by Catholic Priests has become a weapon against the Church and not just a concern about sexual abuse of children wherever it occurs.

Of course, Paulsen’s first category—religious intolerance premised on religious truth—is no longer a cultural option. The religious exemptions debate, in all its manifestations, is about the other

three possibilities. There is a flavor of Paulsen’s categories in Douglas Laycock’s description of the exemption debate, and his place in it:

Devout believers tend to think the religious side should win all the cases that are the least bit arguable; committed secularists tend to think the secular side should win all the cases that are the least bit arguable. I am a thoroughly secular agnostic who respects believers and bears them no ill will, and I think that both the religious and secular “sides” should win on some issues and lose on others.362

The stances do not always appear in plain modes. Religious tolerance that values religious truth does not deny that a religious exemption might be so bizarre or so dangerous that the State would have to deny it. Tolerant secular skepticism can be recognized by its willingness to allow religious exemptions while retaining in the State the ultimate authority to make this decision, always keeping in mind the possibility of insincerity by the religious believer and, increasingly, proposing “conscience” exemptions rather than purely religious ones. Tolerant secular skepticism is distinguished from secular religious intolerance primarily by the level of its presumption that religious exemptions should be granted. Eugene Volokh’s proposal above is an example of such skeptical tolerance.363 The position of secular religious intolerance still lacks political power, but it is increasing in its influence. Its position would not only tend to limit religious exemptions, it would probably also interpret restrictively any conscience exemptions that were enacted. All of these differing commitments on so many issues show why the debate over religious exemptions has been so widespread, so heated, and so fundamental.

It is not possible to say which position will win out. Indeed, there probably will not be a clear winner. But it seems to me that some likely trends can be identified.

First, the demands by religious believers for exemptions will increase and this will lead to greater conflict with the larger society. I do not say this out of any hostility toward religion. To me, such an increase reflects the inevitable logic of the underlying religious commitments, and the increasing ideological gap between many religious commitments and national policy.

363 See generally Volokh, Common-Law Model, supra note 274.
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According to Paulsen, the fundamental ground of religious tolerance is the autonomy of the religious world of the believer, an autonomy that, increasingly, is not recognized by segments of the larger society. From this perspective, it is not proper to compromise on matters of religious liberty, for every such compromise further undermines the cultural position of religion. The logic of this position suggests that every case must be pressed to its fullest extent. Given the opposition between policies favored by secular society and this religious commitment, demands for religious exemptions must continually increase.

Although I lack data on the matter, my impression is that these demands for exemptions are already increasing. Religious demands for exemptions are made today that were never made before, when the position of religion in the culture was much more dominant than currently. At that time of dominance, religion could see itself as in control and had no need to make the point of its autonomy. So, for example, Catholic judges came to grant divorces under liberal divorce laws, without too much fuss. Today, in contrast, some religious believers work hard to ensure religious autonomy and separation.

It is in this context that the debate over the contraception mandate of the ACA should be considered. Clearly the demands for religious exemptions from the contraception mandate are not just a reflection of anti-ACA or anti-Obama sentiment, though that may also be present. These demands reflect deep political, theological, and jurisprudential commitments. Nevertheless, the demand today for exemption is still an expansion of previous positions. Perhaps existing state requirements for religious hospitals and universities to offer contraception benefits are not absolute and therefore there is a need for a clarified federal religious exemption compared to state requirements. This could explain how religious institutions have managed to live with state requirements that look, on the surface, to be similar to the ACA mandate that is now so strongly challenged.

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364 Paulsen, supra note 351, at 1211.

365 This is obviously so with regard to something like gay marriage. But it will increasingly be the case with matters like artificial insemination. See Jessica L. Waters, Testing Hosanna-Tabor: The Implications for Pregnancy Discrimination Claims and Employees’ Reproductive Rights, 9 STAN. J. C.R. & C.L. 47, 57-58 (2013).

366 Of course there was dissent, but obviously the religious concern was overwhelmingly ignored. See James E. Harpster, The Catholic Jurist and Divorce, 35 MARQ. L. REV. 213 (1951).

367 See supra note 284 and accompanying text.
But, before now, no one would have suggested that individual business owners should be exempt from the contraception mandate based on a religious commitment, as some Bishops are now demanding, as one prominent Catholic business group has argued, and as one federal judge has considered sufficiently plausible to grant a preliminary injunction. That is an expansion of any serious previous assertion of religious conscience.

The increasing level of demands for exemptions can be seen elsewhere as well. Not everyone who argues for religious liberty today opposed the result in 1983 in *Bob Jones University*. *Bob Jones* could have been considered a radical challenge to religious liberty. The case upholding, against a Free Exercise challenge, a denial by the IRS of tax exemption because of religiously-motivated racial discrimination, when the government’s compelling interest was the belief that the religious...
motivation at issue was basically immoral. Any attempt to force religious institutions today to hire gays, for example, would be regarded as a direct threat to religious liberty, the *Bob Jones* case notwithstanding.

The expansion of demands extends also to the realm of religious institutional autonomy. The ministerial exception was limited in *Hosanna-Tabor* to persons reasonably viewed as ministers. But recently my own University, Duquesne, after first inviting the NLRA to oversee an election for representation by adjunct professors, then sought a religious exemption from the NLRA, which was denied. The University’s argument against NLRA jurisdiction was defended by Patrick J. Reilly, the president of The Cardinal Newman Society, in the vigorous tones of a defense of religious liberty.

Aside from whether the NLRA has jurisdiction over Duquesne University as a statutory matter, the argument that the University should not be subject to the NLRA as a matter of religious liberty, takes us from government requirement of actions prohibited by religious conscience, or required religious actions prohibited by government, to the suggestion that a religious institution licensed by the State is simply beyond State regulation.

I could add other examples of the increasing demands for religious exemptions. But the details do not actually matter. I am not suggesting that these assertions of religious liberty are in any way improper. Rather, proper or not, their very scale assures that they cannot be fully acceded to. I always thought of myself as committed to religious liberty and exemptions, but I now see that the logic of a separate religious realm cannot work in a modern society. The religious

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372 *Id.*
believer and the religious community cannot be left alone to decide about religious exemptions, as Paulsen seems to require.\footnote{Paulsen, \textit{supra} note 351, at 1187.}

The examples discussed among law professors now include pharmacists who do not want to fill prescriptions for certain drugs,\footnote{See Kimberly D. Phillips, \textit{Promulgating Conscience: Drafting Pharmacist Conscientious Objector Clauses that Balance a Pharmacist’s Moral Right to Refuse to Dispense Medication with Non-Beneficiaries’ Economic and Legal Rights}, 15 Mich. St. U. J. Med. & L. 227, 231-33 (2011).} landlords who do not wish to rent to gays,\footnote{Douglas Laycock identified this concern above as part of the difficulty in enacting a new general religious exemption statute after the \textit{Boerne} decision. See Laycock, \textit{Free Exercise of Religion}, \textit{supra} note 221, at 412.} or taxi drivers who do not wish to transport people for what they consider immoral purposes.\footnote{The precursor of this example arose in 2007 at the Minneapolis airport, where it was estimated that around 5,400 passengers had been denied cab transportation by Muslim drivers who would not transport alcohol or dogs, including seeing-eye dogs. See Barbara Pinto, \textit{Muslim Cab Drivers Refuse to Transport Alcohol, and Dogs}, ABCNews (Jan. 26, 2007), http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=2827800&page=1#.UAMKFPXhejU. On the other hand, there were apparently less onerous ways to accommodate the religious drivers that would not have inconvenienced taxi passengers. According to Charles Haynes, Director of the Religious Freedom Education Project, an accommodation was worked out but “public backlash against the accommodation caused the airport authority to drop it.” Charles C. Haynes, \textit{Why Claims of Conscience Matter}, FIRST AMENDMENT CTR. (Mar. 9, 2012), http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/why-claims-of-conscience-matter.} This all seems to me impossible to accommodate, especially when combined with the demand that a religious owner of a business, or even perhaps a publicly held corporation, might invoke a religious exemption. I cannot believe we are going to live in a world in which I have to show a marriage license to a clerk before the Marriott Hotel chain will rent a room to my wife and me.\footnote{I use this example because J.W. Marriott, Jr., the Chairman of Marriott International, is an active Mormon, not because he has indicated any such intentions. See J. Willard Marriott, \textit{MARRIOTT}, http://www.marriott.com/culture-and-values/j-willard-marriott.mi (last visited June 1, 2013).} The disruption would just be too much for the majority—even the majority of religious believers—to accept. Nor am I personally willing to engage corporate America’s moral judgments about my behavior, at least not unless we expect consumers constantly to make the same exacting judgments about corporate conduct. But, as the controversy over the commitments of Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy makes clear, with its threatened boycotts and counter-
boycotts, the extension of political differences into commercial conduct is not something to be celebrated.

The logic of the religious tolerance stance also requires that Smith be overruled. Returning heightened scrutiny to Free Exercise Clause analysis is the closest outcome possible to actually restricting the power of the State over the religious believer. Any merely statutory exemption fails to genuinely establish that right to autonomy.

But the logic of expansion leads to a second prediction—that Smith will not be overruled. Justice Scalia’s opinion in Smith suggested that it was religious diversity that rendered a strong Free Exercise interpretation impossible. But it is actually the escalating nature of religious exemption claims even by mainstream religious believers that is the central problem. Judges are much less likely today than in 1990 to want to involve themselves in the exemption battle as constitutional interpreters. At least under statutes and state constitutions, or other scenarios, there are other authorities that can correct judicial mistakes. I do not think that the judges now want to be the final word in this field.

My third prediction is that, after all is said and done, the precise form in which states and the federal government protect religious liberty will not matter that much. The national debate that is unfolding is leading to some kind of at least temporary consensus that religious exemptions should be recognized to some extent. The controversy over the contraception mandate in the ACA assures that this consensus, once it emerges, will be a national one.

A lot of fighting is going on to decide how widespread such exemptions should be, what justifications are necessary to provide an exemption, who has the burden of proof, how much disruption must be tolerated by others, and so forth. But eventually these matters will all reach a rough consensus and every jurisdiction will be affected. States that do not have RFRAs will find that their judges interpret state constitutional provisions in parallel with interpretations of RFRAs in states

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383 This is not much of a prediction as most observers would say the same thing. See, e.g., David B. Forhnmayer, Employment Division v. Smith: “The Sky that Didn’t Fall,” 32 CARDOZO L. REV. 1655, 1668 (2011) (“Contrary to many predictions, the Smith II majority did not crumble.”).

that do. States with greater statutory protections will find that their judges interpret them along the lines of the national consensus, as well. I do not foresee states and the federal government differing very much on a matter of fundamental liberty.

But that consensus will not be stable in the long run. My forth, and final, prediction mirrors my first. By inexorable logic, critics of religion will increase their level of hostility as their numbers increase. The recent controversy over a restaurant that gave a discount for church bulletins is only the latest example and is a harbinger of what is to come. Eventually every pro-religion gesture in the public square will have to be resisted. For some nonbelievers, religion itself must not be presumed to be good. That is why something like male circumcision, which has been applied almost uniformly in the United States, even among secularists, could suddenly become an issue merely because religious believers favor it. My prediction here of increasing attacks on religion parallels the estimation of Laycock about the depth of current divide between the religious and the nonreligious: “For the first time in nearly 300 years, important forces in American society are questioning the free exercise of religion in principle—suggesting that free exercise of religion may be a bad idea, or at least, a right to be minimized.”

And because of this inexorable, yet conflicting logic—on one side toward increasing demands for exemptions and, on the other, increasing resistance—there cannot be an ultimate resolution of the role of religion in American life. The temporary consensus of today must yield to the battlefields of tomorrow. We seem doomed to more and more discord in our public life as we seek to decide, in Dworkin’s terms, whether we are religious or secular. We are seeking to decide something that cannot be decided, but can only be fought over.

I reach this conclusion with a great deal of reluctance. But it seems to me the most likely outcome. Before closing, however, I want to suggest that this outcome is not inevitable; it is merely the most likely outcome. There are other ways to think about the religious/

387 Laycock, Free Exercise of Religion, supra note 221, at 407.
nonreligious divide. In the final part of this article, I outline one such possibility.

VI. WE ARE ALL FREELY EXERCISING RELIGION

Vis-à-vis each other, we Americans have become scorpions in a bottle. We believe we are enemies to each other and must fight to the death. This situation obtains in many aspects of our public life, but the situation is worse with regard to religion than in any other field. Of course, this divisiveness is poisoning our politics generally.

There is a cure for this disease, but it is scarcely achievable. That cure is the acknowledgment of common ground among religious believers and nonbelievers. In the arena of the Establishment Clause, that search for common ground requires that religion and nonreligion be seen as separate, but that the common elements of each be recognized, as I have tried to do in a number of works. In contrast, the approach for finding common ground in the area of Free Exercise, and thus of religious exemptions, is somewhat different and requires that religion and nonreligion be considered together.

The reason for the difference in treatment is that the Religion Clauses work differently. The Establishment Clause prevents the government from establishing something traditionally recognized as religion. The Establishment Clause was aimed at preventing domination by organized religious groups. Its bête noire was the period of the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries and other instances of persecution of one religious group by another. Thus, the government was not to take a position concerning which religious tradition was correct as a matter of theology.

But the Free Exercise Clause is different. Debates about religion generally proceed as if the Clauses were written in the same way—as if the First Amendment banned Congress from making a law establishing religion or prohibiting the exercise of religion. Such analyses leave out the word free. The Free Exercise Clause protects not only the traditional practice of traditional religion, though of course it does protect

389 U.S. Const. amend. I.
that, but it also protects the free exercise of religion—or, to put it in another way, the Free Exercise Clause protects religion exercised in a free way.391

In looking at Free Exercise in this way, I am not making a historical or textual argument about the interpretation of the Clause as such, although I do think the framers primarily had in mind oddballs and dissenters in regard to Free Exercise and institutions of power in regard to Establishment. I am suggesting, however, that the text of the Free Exercise Clause invites us to approach the exercise of religion in a way that opens the matter up and allows us to see each other as fellow travelers in religion.

It is not an accident that this is precisely how the Free Exercise Clause was interpreted in the Vietnam-era draft cases, particularly in United States v. Seeger,392 Welsh v. United States,393 and Gillette v. United States.394 In those cases, the traditional religious believer and the seemingly nonreligious claimant were treated more or less the same for purposes of a statutory religious exemption to the draft that was considered against the backdrop of Free Exercise.395

Just what is this religion, then, that is being freely exercised? Douglas Laycock puts the matter well when he writes that ‘‘religion’’ is any set of answers to religious questions, including the negative and skeptical answers of atheists, agnostics, and secularists.”396

And what are these religious questions? Here I perhaps differ from Laycock. For him, religious questions are always “basic theological questions” that might be answered positively or negatively.397 The “fundamental religious question” is “[w]hat is the nature of God and what does He/She want for us?”398 The negative answer to this question—atheism—is religious. Therefore, atheism is protected by Free Exercise on the one hand, while the government may not establish atheism, on the other.

395 See generally Beschle, supra note 4.
397 Id. at 330.
398 Id. at 326.
I agree with these conclusions, but I arrive at them in a different way. For me, for purposes of the Establishment Clause, “religion” includes only traditional theology. For purposes of Establishment, “religion” excludes broader questions that might transcend theology, such as whether there is meaning at all. That is why government is permitted to take a position on whether human existence is meaningful—in public school, for example. In Establishment Clause terms, government is not making a religious claim in asserting that life is meaningful. Nor is it religious establishment for the government to claim that liberty, or even capitalism, is worth defending, even to the point of death.

But, when we come to the protections of the Free Exercise Clause, the phrase “religious questions” is not limited to traditional theology. For Free Exercise, religious questions are the perennial questions of human life, which add up to the fundamental question, what is the meaning of existence? Every attempt to work out the meaning of existence is religious. Every such attempt is a Free Exercise of religion.399

Thus, anyone may claim a religious exemption, for we are all engaged in a religious quest. However, we do not all need religious exemptions. If the answer to the fundamental religious question is that human life is meaningless, there is no reason to act or not act according to that answer. For example, although I would prefer not to lose my life in battle, I cannot be obligated to refrain from fighting if human existence is without meaning. The monotheistic religious believer, on the other hand, might be so obligated, and so might the nontraditional religious seeker who sees the source of transcendent

399 As has been pointed out, this kind of analysis is unfair to traditional religion in the sense that such religion is protected by Free Exercise but limited by Establishment, whereas environmentalism, for example, is not limited by Establishment while a form of environmentalism might well be protected by Free Exercise. See Michael W. McConnell, The Problem of Singling Out Religion, 50 DePaul L. Rev. 1, 10 (2000). This is a fair criticism, but, in the end, it just demonstrates the limits of logic. The reason Free Exercise tends to be interpreted to protect nontraditional beliefs is that such beliefs are like traditional religion in terms of their role in the life of the believer. The reason the Establishment Clause cannot be interpreted in the same broad way is that such an interpretation would essentially require a Rawlsian neutral State under the Establishment Clause. No such State has ever existed. No healthy politics could be sustained under it. As has been pointed out, this kind of analysis is unfair to traditional religion in the sense that such religion is protected by Free Exercise but limited by Establishment, whereas environmentalism, for example, is not limited by Establishment while a form of environmentalism might well be protected by Free Exercise.
obligation elsewhere than in a supernatural God. 400 Again, as Laycock puts it, “[t]he nontheist’s belief in transcendent obligations—in obligations that transcend his self-interest and his personal preferences and which he experiences as so strong that he has no choice but to comply—is analogous to the transcendent moral obligations that are part of the cluster of theistic beliefs that we recognize as religious.” 401

At the moment, both of the opposing sides in the debate about religious exemptions—the religious tolerance and secular intolerance stances—agree that I am wrong in my understanding of the nature of religion. They both insist that religion is something very different from nonreligion—in the first case, positively, and in the latter, critically.

These two sides must be confronted in their assumptions in regard to the nature of religion if America is ever to achieve peace in our public life. A full treatment of these issues is beyond my scope here—although I hope to develop these themes in a later work. For now, let me just sketch the arguments that should be brought to bear.

Religious believers like Paulsen, who insist that religion is unique and that persons who do not believe in God are not entitled to religious exemptions, are making a crucial theological error. Religion, after all, must hold a promise for every human being. When Paul confronted the pagans of Athens who worshipped an unknown God, he called them religious. 402 He then proclaimed to them that they were really worshipping the Lord of Heaven and Earth, though ignorantly. 403 This must be the stance of any genuine believer toward nonbelievers. Nonbelievers are just not yet believers. And if the nonbelievers claim to be religious, even if only to obtain a religious exemption from a law, then they are just that much closer to the truth.

400 This is my short answer to the question asked by Mary Jean Dolan, “what criteria could a court employ to determine the validity of an individual atheist’s claim that certain conduct is demanded by his nonbelief?” See Mary Jean Dolan, Cautious Contextualism: A Response to Nelson Tebbe’s Nonbelievers, 98 Va. L. Rev. in Brief 32, 37 (2012) (emphasis added). There is a tension here, clearly, with not wanting to judge the coherence of the claimed consequences of a religious belief, but it is obviated by the non-fit between some beliefs about existence and any necessary connection to any conduct at all.
401 Laycock, Religious Liberty as Liberty, supra note 396, at 336.
402 Acts 17:22.
Stephen Carter has criticized this culture for treating religion as a hobby, and thus trivializing it.\textsuperscript{404} For Carter, this means that the demands of a supernatural God have been excluded from public life. But what really treats religion as a hobby is approaching religion as something unique and applicable only to a subgroup. Religion is supposed to be about reality itself. In fact, it is supposed to be reality. When religious groups restrict religious exemptions to themselves, they cut themselves, and their God, off from the rest of humanity.

Paulsen argues that this limitation of exemptions to traditional believers is necessary to protect the religious believer.\textsuperscript{405} A religious exemption that anyone can apply for must be interpreted narrowly, whereas one that is restricted to traditional believers can be applied robustly.

Paulsen is right about that, but he is in error in emphasizing it. In the first place, how does Paulsen know who the genuine believer is? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that God was teaching us to get along without Him.\textsuperscript{406} Maybe the nonbeliever is just a better religious student. Second, maybe God is using religious exemptions to pull nonbelievers back into the orbit of faith. From Paulsen’s point of view, the goal should not be the protection of the traditional religious believer, but obeying the will of God.\textsuperscript{407} Paulsen’s special pleading is not a religious stance.

On the other side, the secular hostility to religious exemptions does not rest on anything more than bias against what is perceived as religion. Do such secularists then deny the tradition of conscientious objection? Do they trust the State or the majority so much that they feel there is no need for any realm of human autonomy, or even presumed human autonomy, against the State? Ever? At the very least, such critics should promote conscience clauses for all rather than only criticizing exemptions for religion.

Of course any kind of exemption from any law runs the risk of harm to vulnerable groups. Parents may not vaccinate their children


\textsuperscript{405} See generally Paulsen, supra note 351.

\textsuperscript{406} DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (Eberhard Bethge ed., Reginald H. Fuller trans., 1953).

\textsuperscript{407} See generally Paulsen, supra note 351.
out of unreasoning fear of the harms of vaccination, for example. But
the very fact that conscience clauses exist demonstrates that the simple
objection that religion should not be “above the law” is not persuasive.
Such an attitude fetishizes law. There have always been exceptions.

But, even leaving conscience clauses aside and just considering re-
ligious exemptions, why should anyone accept a narrow view of what
religion is? Like certain religious believers, some secularists treat rel-
igion as nothing but supernaturalism, as if religious naturalism, Recon-
structionist Judaism, and even critical theology do not exist. Such
persons seem not to know that many religious believers reject belief in
a supernatural God.408

And anyway, even if religion is something supernatural, what does
supernatural mean? On my desk right now are a series of books pro-
moting what is obviously religion without endorsing anything one
could call supernatural in the sense of something miraculous: *Being
and Ambiguity,*409 *Religion and Nothingness,*410 and *The Nothingness Beyond
God.*411 Eastern religion is not always definable in the God/not God or
natural/supernatural dichotomies. There is a belief in something
“more” than what is ordinarily apparent, but not a demand for viola-
tions of scientific truth.

Nor does the religion/philosophy divide, which was so important
in the McConnell/Feldman debate about religious exemptions,412 hold
up. The new translation of Martin Heidegger’s monumental *Contribu-
tions to Philosophy* has now been published,413 and I defy anyone to study
it and tell me if the work is one of religion or philosophy.

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408 Even Nelson Tebbe, in his otherwise thoughtful work on nonbelievers, defines
nonbelievers exclusively in terms of the supernatural: “When I refer to nonbelievers
here, I mean to include people who take negative or skeptical positions on the exis-
tence of superhuman beings and supernatural powers.” Tebbe, supra note 385, at 1117.
But there are people who consider themselves traditionally religious and who identify
strongly with their religious traditions while rejecting the supernatural. They consider
that the tradition does not require the supernatural in its essence. Think of Mordecai
Kaplan in Judaism, for example.

409 BROOK ZYPORIN, BEING AND AMBIGUITY: PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERIMENTS WITH TIANTAI
BUDDHISM (2004).


411 ROBERT E. CARTER, THE NOTHINGNESS BEYOND GOD: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHI-
LOSOPHY OF NISHIDA KITARO (2d ed. 1998).

412 See The Berkeley Center, supra note 309 and accompanying text.

413 MARTIN HEIDEGGER, CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY (OF THE EVENT) (Richard
But even if religion is limited to the demands of a supernatural God understood in a traditional way, why should the secularist object if a religious believer believes that God’s commands are superior to the commands of the State? The secularist undoubtedly feels that some human rights are also superior to the commands of the State. Objective truth is objective truth, whether grounded in revelation or reason or art.

Healthy political life requires this recognition of common ground between religious believers and nonbelievers. That is why truly transformative political figures are always going to merge the religious and the nonreligious. Obviously, in American history this was true of both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. But if those figures are simply too religious to make the point, I can refer instead to the secular saint, Vaclav Havel. Havel, the playwright, the revolutionary and the inspirational leader of the Czech Republic, died in 2011. In a review essay, Paul Wilson wrote of Havel’s vision:

It was a vision based on a democratic politics underpinned by a strong civil society and rooted in common decency, morality, and respect for the rule of law and human rights; a politics that sought to transcend racial, cultural, and religious differences by articulating a “moral minimum” that Havel believed existed at the heart of most faiths and cultures and that would provide a basis for agreement and cooperation without sacrificing the unique gifts that each person, each culture, and each “sphere of civilization” could bring to enrich modern life.\(^{414}\)

The question of Havel’s religious beliefs came up repeatedly at the time of his death. Havel did not ask for last rites before he died. He considered the Dalai Lama a spiritual guru. But the inheritance of Christianity is apparent in both his most well-known work, the 1978 essay The Power of the Powerless,\(^ {415}\) and in his insistence on “‘Truth and love.’”\(^ {416}\) Wilson concludes that the question of Havel’s beliefs is inconsequential: “Havel was a deeply spiritual man who expressed his spirituality, if that is the right word, almost entirely through his actions in the world.”\(^ {417}\)


\(^{416}\) Wilson, supra note 414 (citation omitted).

\(^{417}\) Id.
All of us non-churchgoers are going to have to be like Havel. A secular civilization is going to have to answer all the same questions that traditional religions answer. Until now, secular answers to the question of the meaning of life have centered around rationalism, materialism and humanism. Those traditions, however, have problems of their own, problems that secularists have simply ignored. Freud taught us to distrust our vaunted rationality, and now brain science tells us we think on many levels: fast and slow and in a blink. Materialism rests on an uncertain foundation in light of the discoveries of quantum physics. What is matter at base: particle, wave, probability? Matter reacts to our measurements, as if it were watching us watching it. Matter is impossibly entangled at a distance. On the other end of materialism, Darwinian thought tends to the tautological: we are the way we are because we had to be. This may be so, but it is not helpful to living. And as for humanism, Hiroshima and Auschwitz seem to me to recommend original sin as a starting point, rather than a celebration of the human. Secularists do not have the meaning of life wrapped up any more than does the traditional religious believer.

A perspective of common ground might lessen our tendencies to reflexive support and opposition to claims of religious exemption. For the non-churchgoer, that would mean respect for the traditional religions, which have helped so many in their quest for the meaning of existence. And it would suggest a generosity toward assertions of religious exemption. For the traditional believer, the common ground would move the issue of exemptions away from the question of exclusive truth, toward recognition of the harm that exemptions can do and the need for adjustment in the public square.

The recognition of common ground might aid us in the formulation of compromise in the area of religious exemptions.

**Conclusion**

In law school, we do not teach our students about the Constitution. We teach them about the law of the Constitution. Even in teaching students the law of the Constitution, we generally teach them about cases decided by the Supreme Court defining constitutional rights or structure. We do not teach our students about statutes that

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help enforce the Constitution or statutes that seek to define what the Constitution means.

I hope that this article has at least shown that this approach will not teach our students what they need to know to understand the constitutional value of religion in our public life. To understand that value, students are going to have to be sensitive to legislative actions at the state and federal levels, state constitutions, gubernatorial vetoes, voter referenda, administrative actions, and, most important, debate and controversy at all levels of public discourse. The actions of the Supreme Court will be relevant as well, but by no means dominant.

This article raises a number of questions for future development. Is this kind of popular constitutionalism something unique to religion, or have we been ignoring constitutional activity like this in other areas? Insofar as religion is different and more resistant to judicial resolution, what is the state of the constitutional value of religion today? Even more important, what is the state today of our polity? Are we religious or are we secular? And what is our judgment about that very question? Can we in fact ask and answer it? Or, are we almost all—including those called secular and those called religious—both religious and not religious together, so that the question in that form finally disappears? That is my hope for the future.