That Old-Time Religion
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CHURCH AND STATE

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Judge posts Ten Commandments in courtroom; Hindus "not invited" to pray before his sessions

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Judge Roy Moore displays a plaque of the Christian Ten Commandments in his courtroom and opens sessions with prayer. And the judge, a Baptist whose fight to keep religion in his courtroom has inspired a national rally, invites others to pray with him--as long as they're not Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. "They do not acknowledge the God of the holy Bible on which this country was founded," Moore says.

Tens of thousands attended a rally at the Alabama Capitol on April 12 to show their support for Moore, including national conservative leaders like Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition and the Rev. Don Wildmon of the American Family Association. The judge has won wide support from conservative groups, as well as Alabama politicians and congressional leaders, as he appeals orders for him to stop opening court sessions with prayer and to remove or alter the wooden plaque of the Ten Commandments that hangs behind his bench. Moore contends the First Amendment gives him the right to practice

Christianity in his Etowah County Circuit courtroom.

Even the US Congress passed a resolution in support of the judge (House Concurrent Resolution 31) on March 6 stating "the sense of the Congress is that the Ten Commandments are a declaration of fundamental principles that are the cornerstones of a fair and just society and the public display, including display in government offices and courthouses should be permitted." Representative Scott of Virginia complained that "the courtroom loses its neutrality when it endorses a specific religious doctrine, and one Federal court has already decided that the posting of the Ten Commandments in a courtroom is unconstitutional." Others complained legal rulings were driving all signs of any religion from public view.

Not all of Moore's supporters are aware that he draws a firm line against inviting anyone outside the Judeo-Christian tradition to conduct the prayers in his courtroom. "My duty under the Constitution is to acknowledge the Judeo-Christian God," not the gods of other faiths, Moore said. "We are not a nation founded upon the Hindu god or Buddha." Only Christians have been invited to lead the prayers, but the judge's clerk, Scott Barnett, said he did try to contact a local rabbi but couldn't reach him. While Moore would not invite representatives of other religions, he would not stop them. "That's their right," Moore said.

Some of the judge's supporters were troubled that Moore was insisting on his own religious freedom but limiting its practice to one faith only. "My personal view is that our founding

fathers would have permitted prayer from other denominations," said former U.S. Sen. Jeremiah Denton, who lead the Pledge of Allegiance at the April 12 rally.

Gov. Fob James, who has vowed to call out National Guard troops to defend Moore's beliefs if necessary, said he doesn't think Moore is being intolerant of non-Christians by refusing to invite them to pray in his court. "I think that's his call," said James, a rally speaker. "You might ask Congress how many Hindu or Muslim leaders they have had to lead prayers." The U.S. House of Representatives' chaplain, who invites about one pastor a week during sessions to give the opening prayer, said Tuesday in Washington that he recalled a Muslim giving it at the request of a congressman. Imam Siraj Wahaj was invited by Rep. Nick Rahall, a West Virginia Democrat, and gave the prayer in 1991. "There's no exclusion that I know of," said the Rev. James Ford, a Lutheran who has been House chaplain for 18 years.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, which has filed a brief opposing Moore's side in the lawsuit, is concerned that the judge appears to be endorsing a specific religion to the exclusion of others, said Jay Kaiman of the ADL's Southeast regional office in Atlanta. "If I had a problem ... and I was in front of Judge Moore--and he knew what I did for a living and he knew my faith--I would feel that would bias his attitude," said Kaiman, who is Jewish.

Other critics noted that Muslims worship the same God as Jews and Christians, just in a different way. "With all due respect to the good judge, he is clearly wrong," said Leon J. Weinberger, a

Judaic studies professor at the University of Alabama. "The Muslim Allah is the same as the Jewish 'El' found throughout the Bible."