

Judge OKs References to God During Inauguration

Despite a legal challenge by several atheist organizations, President-elect Barack Obama will repeat the words “so help me God” when he is sworn in as president on Tuesday.

✖[] A U.S. District judge denied a California atheist’s request to remove references to God from President-elect Barack Obama’s swearing-in on Tuesday.

After a two-hour hearing last Thursday, Judge Reggie B. Walton of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia denied plaintiff Michael Newdow’s request to bar Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts from administering the president’s oath with the words “so help me God.”

In their lawsuit filed in early January, Newdow and 11 atheist and humanist organizations also claimed that references to God in the invocation and benediction and the use of a Bible during the swearing-in ceremony violated the Constitution’s ban against respecting an establishment of religion and discriminated against them as nonbelievers.

Walton called the religious speech “ceremonial,” saying the references to God during inaugurations are not substantially different from legislative prayers that the Supreme Court has permitted for years, Religion News Service (RNS) reported.

Walton did not dismiss the case but said it is “highly questionable” that he has the authority to prevent Obama from making religious references or inviting ministers on stage to pray. He also said he had difficulty understanding how Newdow and the other plaintiffs could say they would be harmed if Roberts administered the oath with the words “so help me God” while supporting Obama’s personal free exercise to use the same phrase.

Newdow, a California physician who tried unsuccessfully to remove the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance, has sued twice before to have religious references at presidential inaugurations declared unconstitutional. Both attempts failed.

Before Walton's decision on Thursday, President-elect Obama asked that the words "so help me God" be added to the end of the oath of office, and Chief Justice Roberts said he would honor Obama's wishes, CNN reported. Though not part of the specific language that must be said when swearing in a president, the phrase has been added to the end of the oath for at least a century.

"This is a practice subversive to the principle of equality," Newdow argued on Thursday, according to RNS. "The harm is it turns people into second-class citizens, and you're not allowed to do that."

Along Roberts and several inauguration organizers, Newdow's lawsuit named Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren, who is giving the invocation, and the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who is giving the benediction.

Newdow said he would appeal the ruling but added, "I think it's going to be futile," RNS reported.

In addition to Warren and Lowery, openly gay Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson, a Muslim woman, three rabbis and a Catholic archbishop will pray during events surrounding the inauguration.

Robinson was to pray during an inaugural kickoff event on Sunday in a move widely criticized by conservative Christians. Warren, however, applauded Obama's decision to include Robinson.

"President-elect Obama has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in

search of common ground," Warren said in a statement. "I applaud his desire to be the president of every citizen."

Because of Warren's opposition to gay marriage, Robinson had said Obama's decision to have him give the invocation was "like a slap in the face."

On Wednesday, Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America, the nation's largest Muslim group, is scheduled to pray at the National Prayer Service, a closing inaugural event held at the National Cathedral, the Associated Press (AP) reported. Rabbi David Saperstein, Conservative Rabbi Jerome Epstein and Orthodox Rabbi Haskel Lookstein will also say prayers, along with the Most Rev. Donald Wuerl, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Washington. The Rev. Sharon Watkins, president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the first woman to lead a mainline Protestant denomination, will give the sermon.

Following a tradition started by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Obama will attend a private prayer service at St. John's Episcopal Church on the morning of his inauguration. Bishop T.D. Jakes will give the sermon, the AP reported.