

THE INQUISITION IS NOT AROUND THE CORNER

Maybe America is not going to get Christianized next week after all.

And maybe part of the panic in the San Francisco and national Jewish community on this subject during the last election period was inspired by partisan politics, as some observers then suggested.

When the Bulletin did its survey of Federation members last October, it found that the Jews in this area did not see much difference between Reagan and Mondale on the subject of Israel -- but were greatly exercised about the perceived difference between them on church-state matters.

After all, the fundamentalist movement was trying to legislate prayer in the public schools, and pushing religious symbols in government places. The courts seemed to be going along.

Last week's Supreme Court decision was significant mainly for the reasons it gave for ruling out silent prayers designated as religious in nature. Since 1971, the Supreme Court has been using a three-prong test to determine whether the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment was being violated. If a law or practice did not have a secular purpose; if it either advanced or obstructed religion as its primary purpose; and if it involved an "excessive entanglement" between church and state, then it was deemed unconstitutional.

Some observers thought this three-prong test was headed for the junkyard, but last week the Supreme Court reaffirmed the test as valid. No society which applies that test is about to become officially "Christianized."

But what about the legislative efforts to do church-state damage? Well, the prayer bill was defeated. And the law to permit "equal access" to religious groups on high school campuses was so watered down that the title became a misnomer. Congress built special prohibitions into the bill: no access to religious groups during school hours; no access to religious groups if the school administration or personnel became involved. It was, in large part, an open door statement that closed the door.

Well, what about those court cases which said nativity scenes (and presumably Jewish religious symbols) in government places were okay? Now, admittedly, that's getting close to the bone. The courts, at best, were trying in these cases to balance the question of church-state separation with the question of the free exercise of religion -- and many of us think they lost their balance. It's bad medicine, and a local fight will have to be made around the country, but it's not exactly the "Christianization of America." Nor is it a foot in the door, as long as the Supreme Court continues to slam the door, as it did last week.

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Of course, it's not good to get too casual about all this. School officials in this area recently received a letter from something called the "National Association of Christian Educators," which said in part: "When we get an active Christian parents' committee in operation in all districts, we can take complete control of all local school boards. We can return our Christian morals to our schools, and literally save our country."

That's a pretty chilling note, and such groups were given encouragement by the hyper-activity of the fundamentalist religious movements. And while the "equal access" law may have legalized nothing that wasn't legal before, it might well have encouraged such groups to try a few new maneuvers -- even though our contact with about 150 school administrators in the West Bay area uncovered no such efforts.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court decision last week inspired Senator Helms to step up efforts to get a Constitutional amendment permitting prayers in the schools. If we relax our efforts to defend against such an amendment, it might just pass some day because it sounds so wholesome -- and then we would be on a very slippery slope.

But without abandoning the ramparts, we might as well take that last Supreme Court decision at face value and recognize that the Inquisition is not around the corner.