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OPINION

Politics and Prayer

Legislative prayers should be nonsectarian

Iman Matthew Ramadan opened a recent legislative session with a prayer. The prayer was inspirational. It invoked the names of David, Solomon, Jesus and Mohammed in blessing our servicemen and women, reminding us of our responsibility to the needy and asking for God's countenance upon our homes and places of worship.

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The prayer was an articulation and celebration of a religious tradition. It was not a request to bow a head to a different theology or pray in the name of a different tradition. It was prayer that beckoned interested people to join. It did not symbolically point a finger towards the exit for legislators of a different faith.

The path of sectarian prayer can lead, by contrast, to ugliness. No honor was added to the long and distinguished history of the Minnesota House when a member recently stated to a Jewish member in a debate about prayer: "And we shouldn't be left not able to pray in the name of our God. And if you don't like it, you may have to like it. Or just don't come." This is the proverbial poke in the eye with the sharp stick. It's that simple.

And that's why the March 1 editorial column written by D.J. Tice, a writer who often puts things in proper perspective, is puzzling.

Instead of carefully analyzing this controversy solely in the context of previous House prayer debates, Mr. Tice confused the issue with a weak conspiracy theory thinly rooted in partisan bickering and ideological stereotyping. As a result, one might conclude that the prayer controversy is simply another front in the war between political partisans or a fight of nomenclature between the "religious right" and the "irreligious left." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

According to a transcript of the debate on House prayer, Rep. Michael Paymar, who is Jewish, said, "I would like to be part of that moment where a religious leader gets up before us and has a prayer. But I would like that to be nondenominational, and I would like it to be respectful of who I am."

Consider now the response of Rep. Arlon Lindner, a supporter of sectarian prayer: "You know, we're told there's one God and one mediator between God and man. The man Christ Jesus [sic]. And most of us here are Christians. And we shouldn't be left not able to pray in the name of our God. . . . And if you don't like it, you may have to like it. Or just don't come. I don't come sometimes for some prayers here. . . . We have that privilege, and you need to exercise it. But don't impose your irreligious left views on me."

In effect, Rep. Lindner is saying that the majority religion rules and those in a minority religion had better deal with it or leave the chamber.

To be fair, Rep. Lindner has since stated that he did not intend his remarks "to be anti-Semitic" and that he loves Jewish people. But his remarks reflect

does he respect them?

For a person of Mr. Tice's erudition, his commentary on the Lindner situation is far afield from the core issue — decency and respect in the halls of our government. Here's the lesson: Don't tell a person of one religion to leave the floor of the House because he or she doesn't want to pray in the name of another religion.

Most Minnesotans also recognize the combustible nature of mixing religion and politics. It often explodes with people abandoning common sense and making regretful statements. The founders of our state recognized this danger in article 16 of the Bill of Rights of our state constitution, which states: "[No] preference [shall] be given by law to any religious establishment or mode of worship." This principle underscores the lack of wisdom in permitting sectarian prayer in the House of Representatives.

We end with two hopes: (1) That we meet with Rep. Lindner and make some good of this situation particularly with respect to Rep. Paymar; and (2) The House move beyond this issue and act with the decency of the heroes of Minnesota of which Mr. Tice has frequently written about.

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