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Religious Diversity:
'Tolerant' Senator Leaves the Room
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"It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."

--August 1790 letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I., following Touro Synagogue Rededication While the pendulum of interpersonal sensitivity swings further from the social constraints of political correctness, serious consideration of social responsibility sometimes goes out with the bathwater. On Wednesday, April 4, 2007, Republican Sen. Dan Patrick boycotted the first prayer delivered in the Texas Senate by a Muslim cleric, Imam Yusuf Kavakci. In a quote in DallasNews.com, the senator said, "It is important that we are tolerant of all faiths as a people, but that does not mean we have to endorse all faiths -- and that was my decision."

It may be time to consider what place respect of another's faith has in maintaining one's own personal sense of religious identity, for if each of us were to walk out the door when another expressed opposing beliefs, we'd be left with many empty rooms. The imperative of freedom of belief lies in the fact that a person's thoughts and values are held safe in his heart and mind, no matter how forcefully others may try to change them.

We live in the most religiously diverse country in the world, in which people of differing religious beliefs coexist, yet religion flourishes. And what comes from the right to personal beliefs is the protection of individuality and personal dignity. Showing respect, not merely tolerance, honors the humanity we all have in common and lifts everyone's dignity, without compromising personal faith.

...

Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated.

--George Washington's letter to Edward Newenham, October 20, 1792

This great American experiment of religious freedom, conceived of by our Founding Fathers and guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, allows people to fully celebrate their own religion, to honor each other's

differences, and to get down to the business of peaceful democracy. How are we to show the world that America got it right with this constitutional guarantee -- one that has protected us for over 200 years from internal religious wars -- if our leaders don't step up to the plate and show the world how it's done?

Sen. Patrick had the right to walk out on the imam's prayer, yes, but as a political leader, he missed an opportunity to show that we don't just tolerate religious differences in this country; we fiercely protect the right to be different, and depend on inclusive, cooperative gatherings of diverse people to carry out the democratic process.

According to Online American Muslim Perspective, Patrick later gave a short speech on the Senate floor in which he called Kavakci's prayer an "extraordinary moment" that underscores that America is a nation "so tolerant of others we bend over backwards to allow others to pray as they wish."

How different the tone would have been had he exclaimed that Americans are so respectful of others that we bend over backwards to protect each other's right to pray as we wish.

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