



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on June 12, 2017

Sanders Rejects Nominee for OMB Deputy Director for His Christian Views

Recent comments made by Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) vividly illustrate just how fragile the liberties protected by our federal Constitution really are. And how little respect leftists such as Sanders, and even some others who claim to be “libertarians,” have for private religious opinions. Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson even dismissed religious liberty as just a “black hole.”



Sanders announced after a Senate hearing last Wednesday that he would vote no for the confirmation of Russell Vought as deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, simply because Vought had written in January 2016 that only persons who believe in Jesus Christ have salvation — a belief shared by 40 percent of Americans, according to a survey conducted by Life Way, an agency of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

Of course, true Americanism and a real dedication to the concept of religious liberty (or any other liberty) would dictate that we do not need to be in the majority to have our opinions protected by government. For that matter, a true advocate of liberty would support the *right* of a person to express any religious view whatsoever, unless the person was calling for harm to another person.

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When the 13 states of the United States adopted the Constitution in 1789, there was a wide variety of Christian denominations in existence in the country, plus assorted deists, atheists, Jews, and the like. The United States had only recently won its independence from the British Empire (1783), and most of the constitutional Framers resented the restrictions on religious liberty imposed by that British government. In fact, at various times in its history, the British government had imposed “religious tests” before someone could legally hold public office in that nation — sometimes by Catholics against Protestants; at other times, Protestants against Catholics.

As Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC, said, “We’ve seen what happens when the state sets itself up as a theological referee.”

So that no such law could ever be passed in the United States, the Framers included in Article VI of the Constitution the phrase “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office of public trust under the United States.”

When Sanders declared he would vote no to a nominee, not because of any action that the nominee had taken, or action advocated by the nominee, but simply because Sanders did not agree with that nominee’s religious belief, many raised questions as to whether such action would violate the “religious test clause.”

In the hearing, Senator Sanders brought up an article that Russell Vought had written several months ago for the Christian website *The Resurgent*. In that article, Vought defended the decision of Wheaton



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College (his alma mater) to fire a political science professor, Larycia Hawkins, who had made a Facebook post saying that Christians and Muslims “worship the same God,” and put on a hijab to show solidarity with American Muslims.

Wheaton College is a private evangelical Christian school (attended by many well-known evangelicals such as Billy Graham), and its officials contended that Hawkins’ statement contradicts their statement of faith. Vought argued in his piece which defended her termination, “Muslims do not simply have a deficient theology, they do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ, His Son, and they stand condemned.”

After reading this statement from Vought’s article, Sanders asked Vought, “Do you believe that statement is Islamophobic?”

“Absolutely not, Senator,” Vought responded. “I’m a Christian, and I believe in a Christian set of principles based on my faith. That post, as I stated in the questionnaire to this committee, was to defend my alma mater, Wheaton College, a Christian school that has a statement of faith that includes the centrality of Jesus Christ for salvation.”

But Sanders did not accept Vought’s position that this is simply his interpretation of the Bible, but continued to challenge him, asking: “I don’t know how many Muslims there are in America, I really don’t know, probably a couple million. Are you suggesting that all of those people stand condemned? What about Jews? Do they stand condemned too?”

Vought tried to continue, stating, “Senator, I am a Christian,” but Sanders cut him off, declaring, “I understand that you are a Christian! ... But there are other people who have different religions in this country and around the world. In your judgment, do you think that people who are not Christians are going to be condemned?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjQSwYV5Qzs?ecver>

Vought responded, “As a Christian, I believe that all individuals are made in the image of God and are worthy of dignity and respect, regardless of their religious beliefs.”

Sanders wasn’t buying Vought’s explanation, and continued to attack, asking, “And do you think your statement that you put in that publication, ‘They do not know God because they rejected Jesus Christ the Son, and they stand condemned,’ do you think that’s respectful of other religions?”

Vought again made an effort to educate Sanders, repeating his earlier statement that Wheaton College believes in “the centrality of Jesus Christ in salvation.”

At the conclusion of their exchange, Sanders responded to Vought’s religious belief — that only those who believe in Jesus Christ are saved (and therefore, not condemned). “I would simply say, Mr. Chairman, this this nominee is really not someone who is what this country is supposed to be about. I will vote no.”

This exchange, concluding with Sanders’ blunt statement that he would vote against Vought simply because Vought held to the position of Wheaton College — which states the “centrality of Jesus Christ in salvation” — touched off an immediate dispute between those supporting Sanders as a defender of religious tolerance, and others arguing that he had violated the “no religious test” clause of the Constitution.

James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute (and a Maronite Christian), wrote a piece for the *Huffington Post*, arguing that Sanders had not violated the “no religious test” clause of the Constitution.



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“He is right,” Zogby said of Sanders’ position. In reference to Vought, Zogby asserted that Vought is unfit to be deputy director of the OMB, arguing that it was Vought, not Sanders, who had used a “religious test to support the firing of a tenured professor.” Zogby said that it was Professor Hawkins’ “description of her faith [that] did not comport with his narrow interpretation of Christian theology.”

Scott Simpson, a director for Muslim Advocates, took a similar position to that of Zogby, insisting, “This is the type of speech that was being used against somebody,” when Vought argued that a professor should lose her job.

But another Muslim, Hussein Rashid, founder of Islamicate L3C, defended Vought’s right to express his religious opinions, arguing that they were not “inherently Islamophobic or anti-Semitic.” Rashid noted that it is only “action” that is worrisome. “I think we have to accept that there are theologies that are what I would call exclusionary, that only certain people will go to heaven and certain people will go to hell.”

Mohammed Hassan Khalil, professor of religious studies at Michigan State, took a similar position. He noted that the Koran teaches the existence of hell, and most Muslims believe that those who reject the message of the prophet Muhammad are going there.

SBC leader Russell Moore saw Sanders’ position as “dangerous” and “troubling.”

Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), however, found that it was Vought’s views that were troubling, not those of Sanders. He stated that Vought’s viewpoint is wrong, arguing, “I’m a Christian, but part of being a Christian, *in my view*, is recognizing that there lots of ways that people can pursue their God.” (Emphasis added.)

And Senator Van Hollen has every right to that religious viewpoint. But Vought likewise has every right to his viewpoint, as well. Millions of Americans share the views of Van Hollen, while millions of others take the position of Vought. But as mentioned previously, one should not have to obtain approval from any other American for one’s own religious views, and the right to express them.

But did Sanders violate the “religious test” clause of the Constitution by voting against Vought simply because of his belief that only those who believe in Jesus Christ have salvation?

One law professor quoted by *U.S. News & World Report* argued, “Senators can vote against nominees for any reason or no reason at all. It may be atrocious, but it’s not unconstitutional.”

But what does the “religious test” clause actually say? Clearly, private citizens are free to vote against someone simply because of a candidate’s religion — as many did in the case of the Catholic Al Smith in the presidential campaign of 1928, or in opposition to Mormon Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential contest. For that matter, many Catholics voted for John Kennedy in 1960 simply because he was a Catholic, and many Baptists supported Jimmy Carter in 1976 only because he was a Southern Baptist.

There was even a story that a Republican woman voted against Barry Goldwater in 1964 because she was under the mistaken belief that he was going to get rid of T.V. (It was actually the T.V.A., the Tennessee Valley Authority.)

Sanders, however, is *not* a private citizen, but a U.S. senator, who has taken an oath to “support” the Constitution of the United States. This requirement in Article VI is immediately followed by the words, “But no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

The argument that Vought imposed a religious test on the Wheaton professor is irrelevant, for two



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reasons. First, Vought had no authority to end the professor's employment, but was simply stating his opinion — he cast no vote to fire her because he was not in any position of authority to do so. Second, even if he had possessed the authority to fire her, and had done so exclusively because of her religious views, this would not have been a violation of the religious test clause of the Constitution. Wheaton College is a *private* institution, whose officials are free to hire and fire professors as they wish. A professorship at a private college is not a public office.

In contrast, the position of deputy director of the OMB is unquestionably an "office or public trust under the United States." And, Sanders is a person who has the authority to vote to confirm or reject a nominee of the president for that position. In rejecting Vought, Sanders used a "religious test" explicitly forbidden in Constitution, which Sanders has sworn to support.

David French wrote in *National Review*, "Sanders' actions also show the fragility of some of our core constitutional protections." He charged that Sanders and others like him "hate Christianity," and wish to "drive evangelicals from the public square." But, French also noted, "There is no right or ability to sue Sanders into compliance [with the Constitution]. He can vote however he chooses, and there is no cause of action to compel him to cleanse his mind of unconstitutional motivations when he casts those ballots."

Sadly, if we were able to remove every member of Congress who ignores the Constitution, it would pretty much clean the place out. But Sanders, a man who so loves Marxism that he spent his honeymoon in the Soviet Union, would be a good member to lead the exit.



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