

MELISSA ROGERS

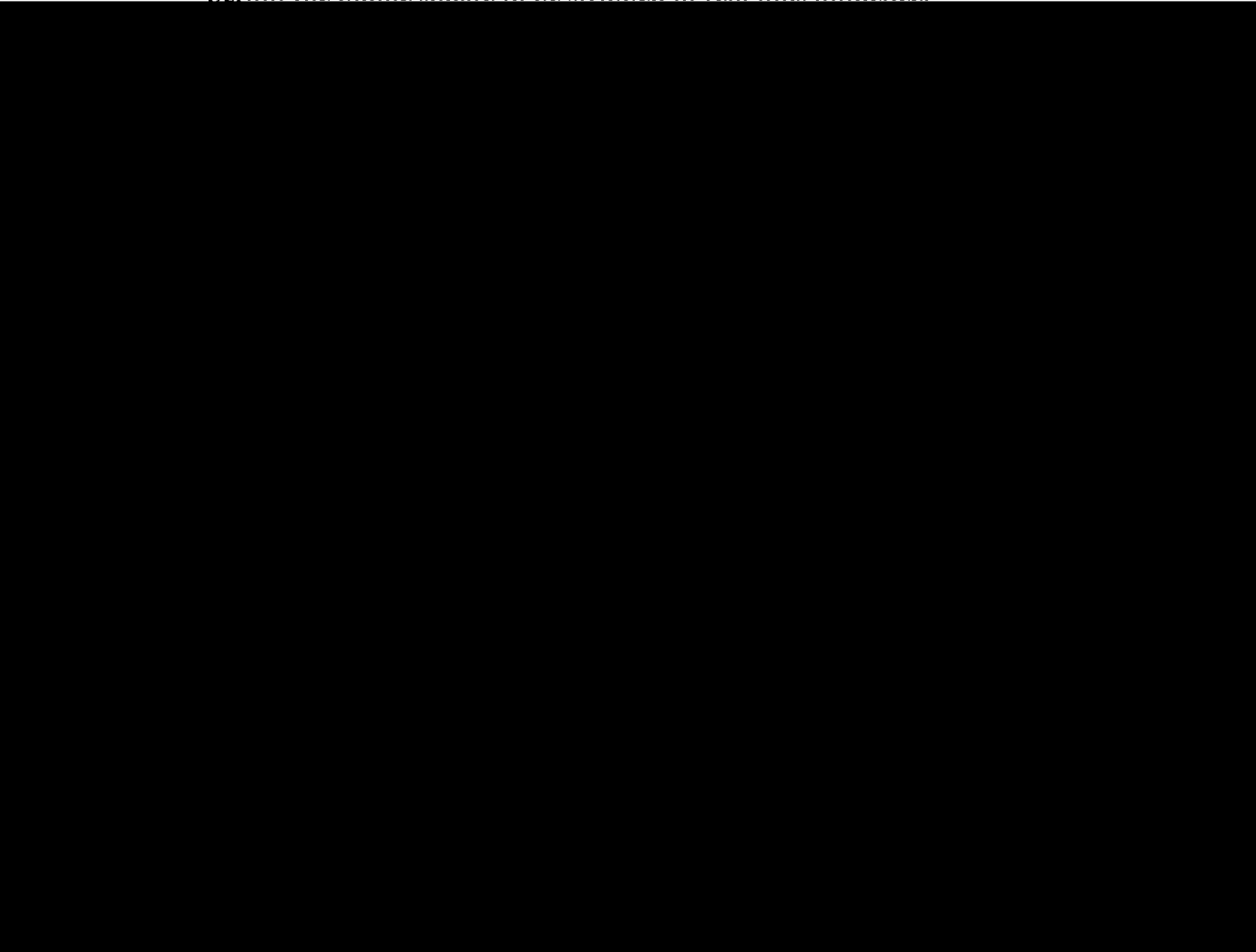
Religious freedom



Religious freedom in the US

How do these constitutional principles apply in various settings? In public schools, for example, the US supreme court ruled in the 1960s that the ban on governmental promotion of religion prohibited school teachers from leading their classes in prayers and Bible readings. But these rulings leave room for students to pray and read the Bible at school as well as to form religious clubs in public secondary schools on the same basis as they form other non-curriculum-related clubs, such as chess clubs or scuba-diving clubs.²

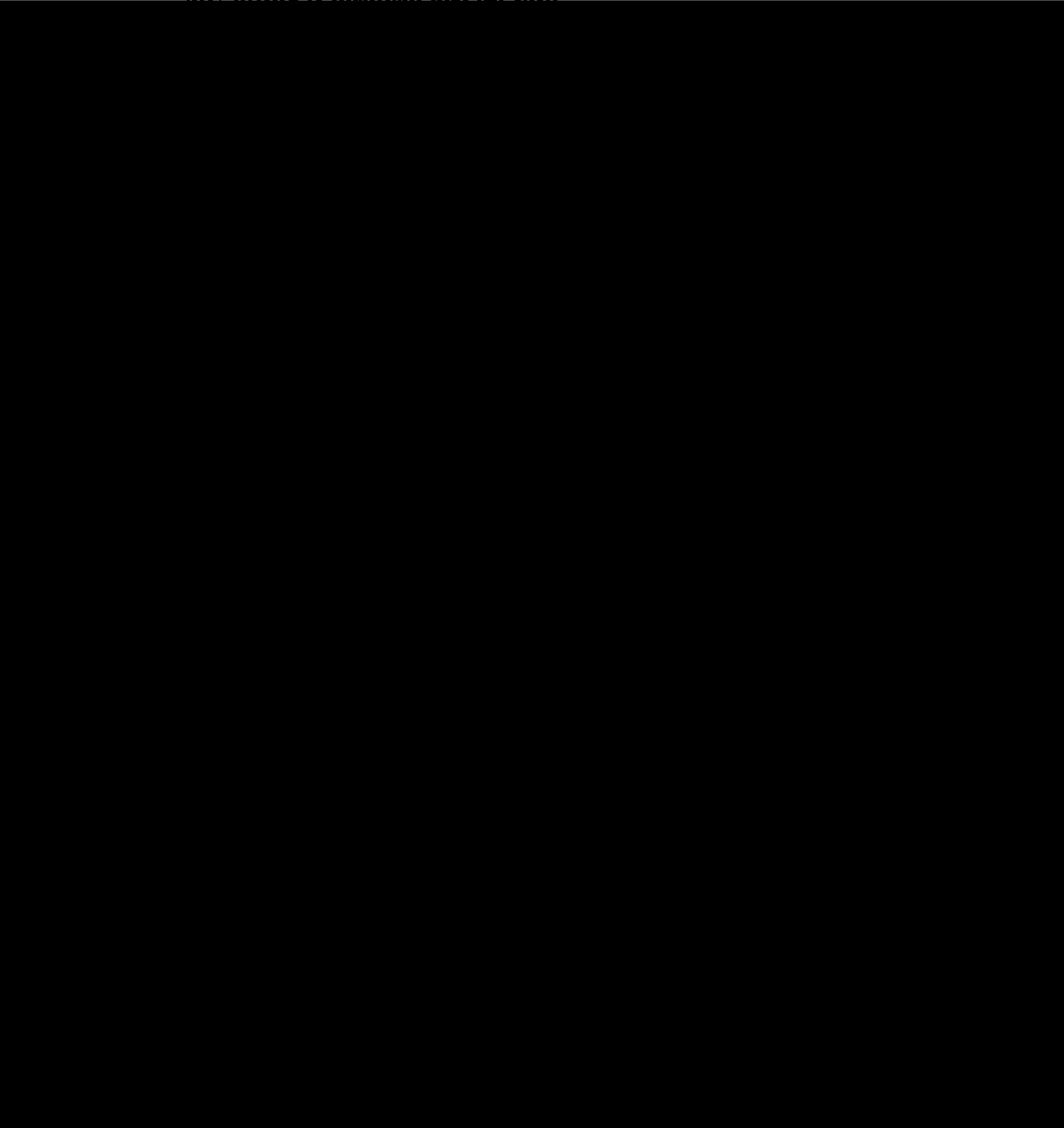
Under our constitution, the government cannot erect or sponsor displays that lack a secular purpose and primary effect. To cite one prominent example, when an Alabama judge recently placed a several-ton monument featuring the ten commandments in a courthouse lobby, a court found the display unconstitutional. But the supreme court has held that, when groups of citizens are generally permitted access to government parks, citizens wishing to hold religious rallies or carry religious symbols also must be permitted such access as long as it is clear that the government is not endorsing religion. So, while it is sometimes suggested otherwise, the US constitution does not require or permit the public square to be stripped of religious influence.³



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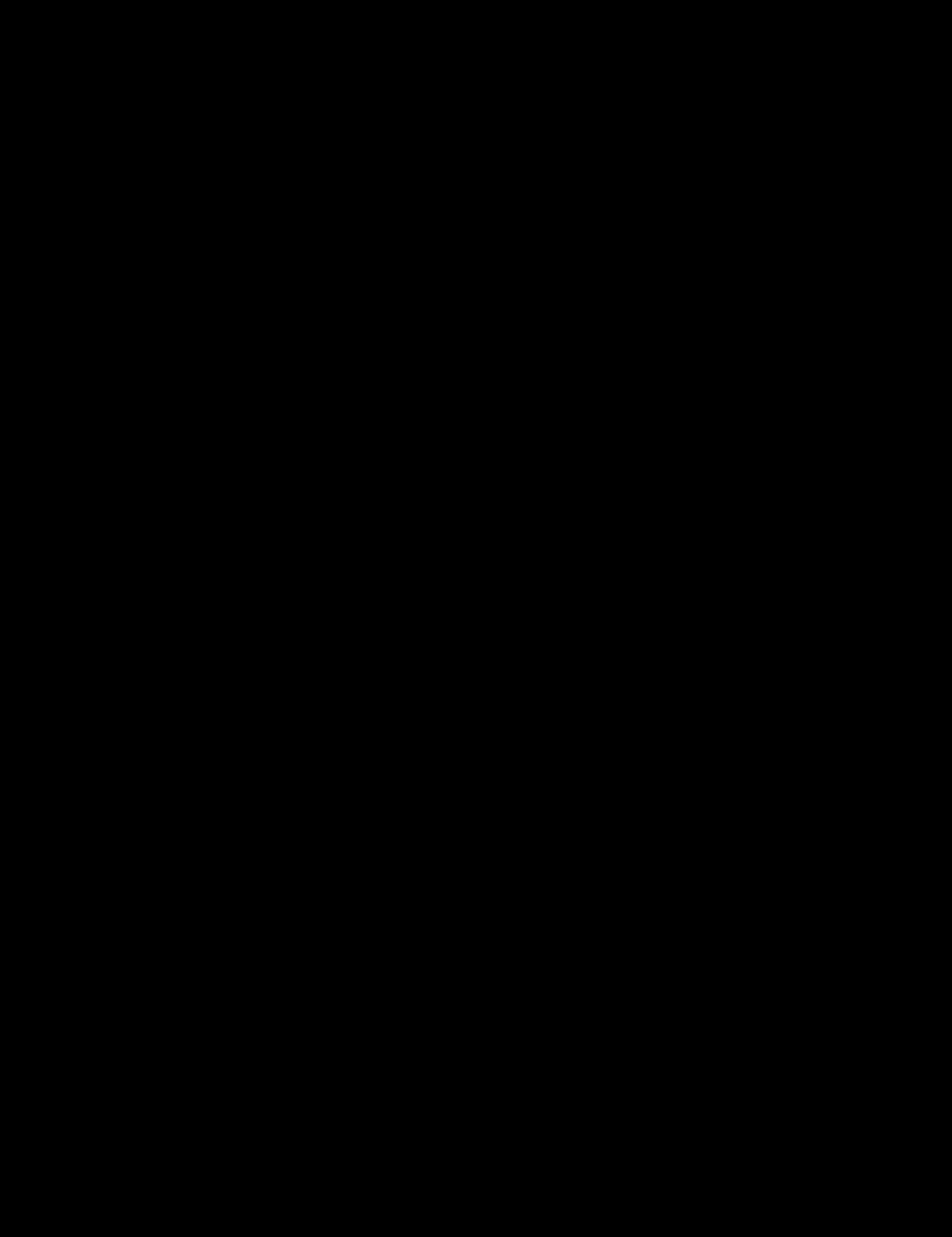
the public square, we should remember that we are “God’s servants,” *not* “God’s spokespeople.”⁵ Humility is an essential ingredient when mixing religion and public affairs.

Legal restrictions in the area of American policy-making and politics flow not only from our constitution, but also from our tax code. For example, tax-exempt groups organized under Section 501(c)(3) of our tax code, including churches and many other religious organizations, are prohibited from endorsing candidates for elective public office if they intend to maintain that tax-exempt status.⁶



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constitution provides less than adequate protection for this right in



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government to pressure people to embrace religion. But these traditional church-state rules have produced robust religious freedom in our country and an incredibly vital religious landscape. If the prohibition on government-endorsed religion were abandoned, government could endorse Christianity and thereby sacrifice precious rights of conscience, corrupt religion, create bitter divisions, and weaken our country as a whole.¹⁰

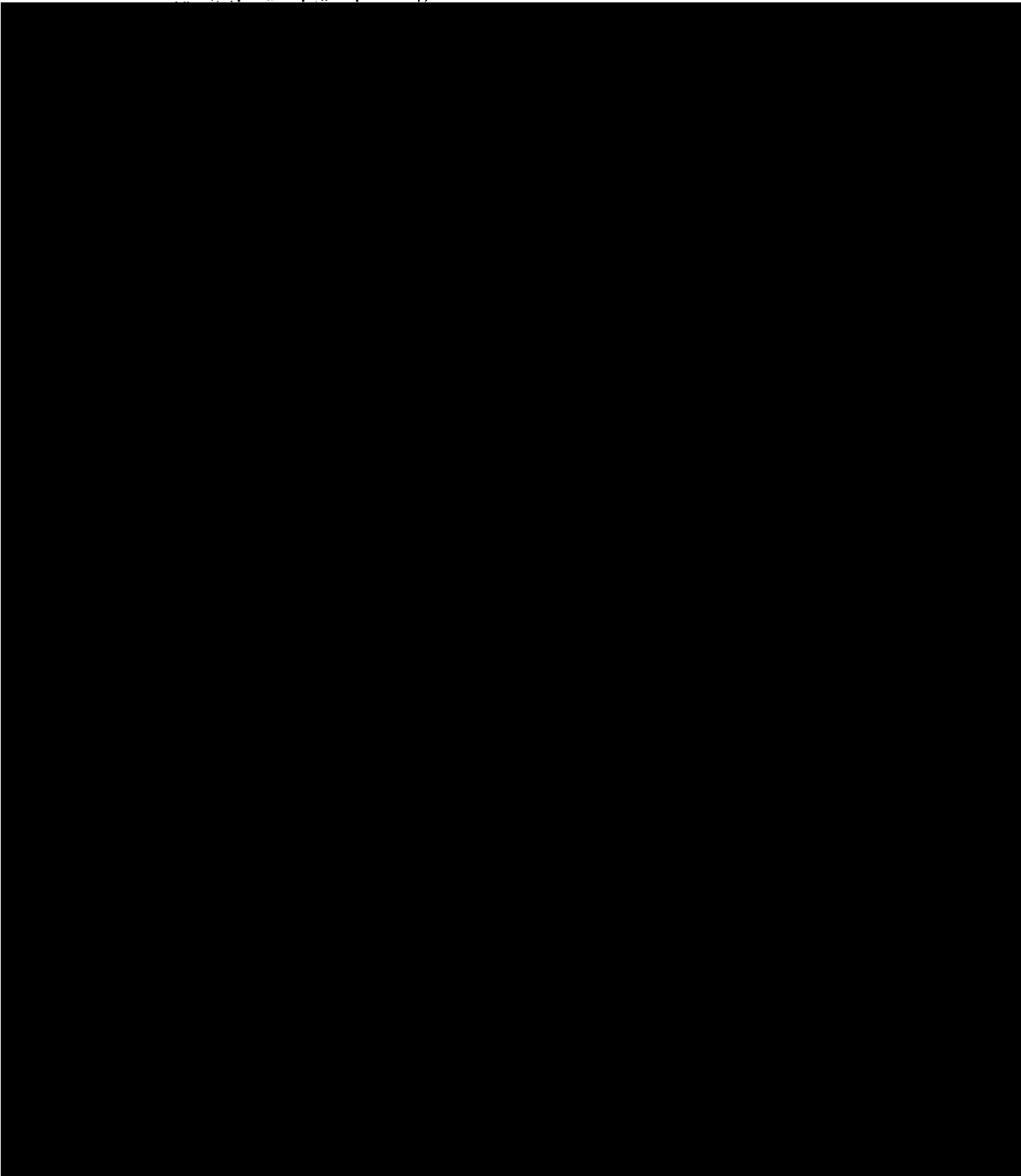
Religious freedom also is threatened when we normalize govern-



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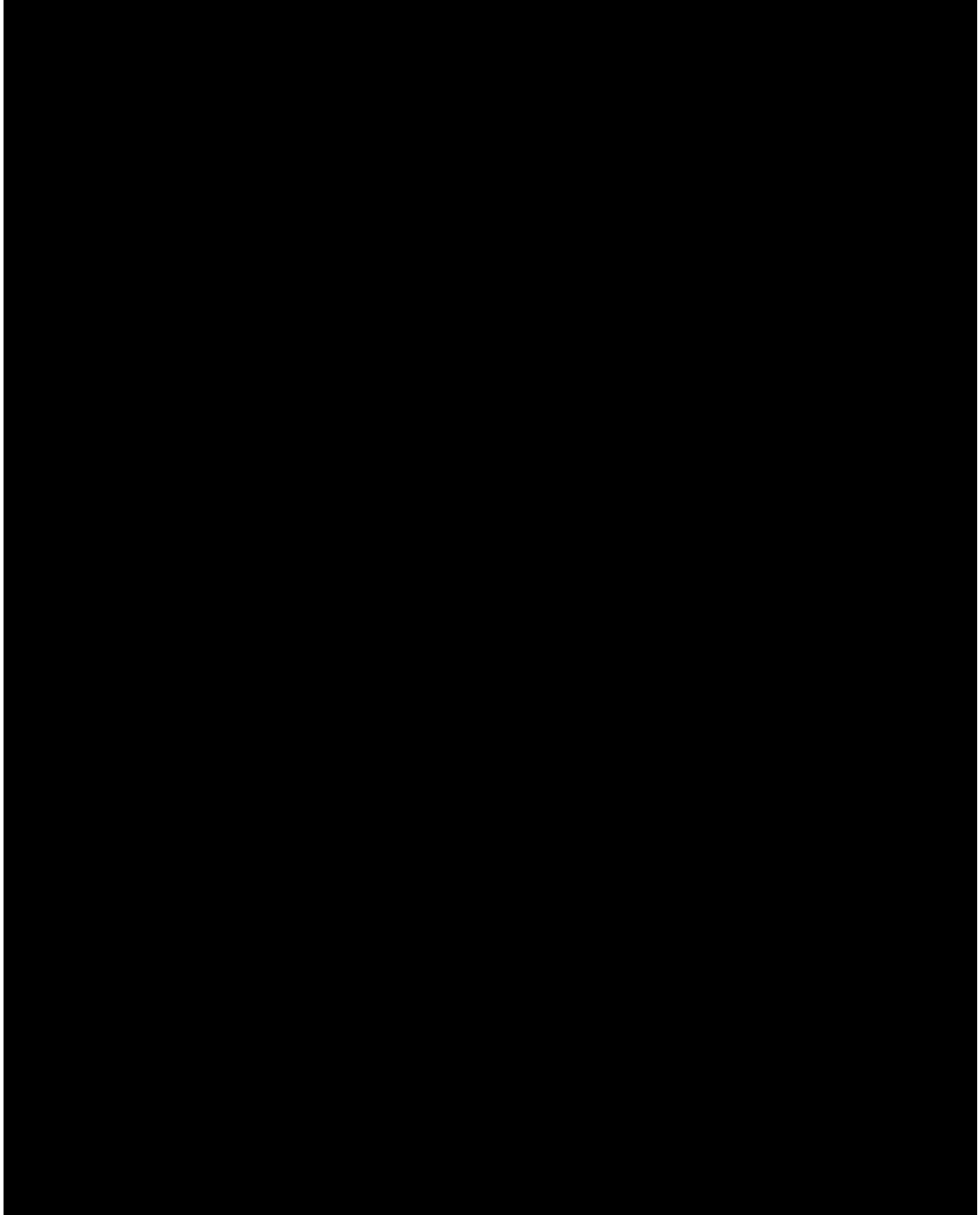
opinion, permitting direct aid to be used in this way violates the constitutional ban on government support for religion and improperly allows the government to make religion relevant to one's standing in the political community. Furthermore, it is simply wrong to tell taxpayers that they are ineligible for a job they help to fund because they

are not “in” the line.



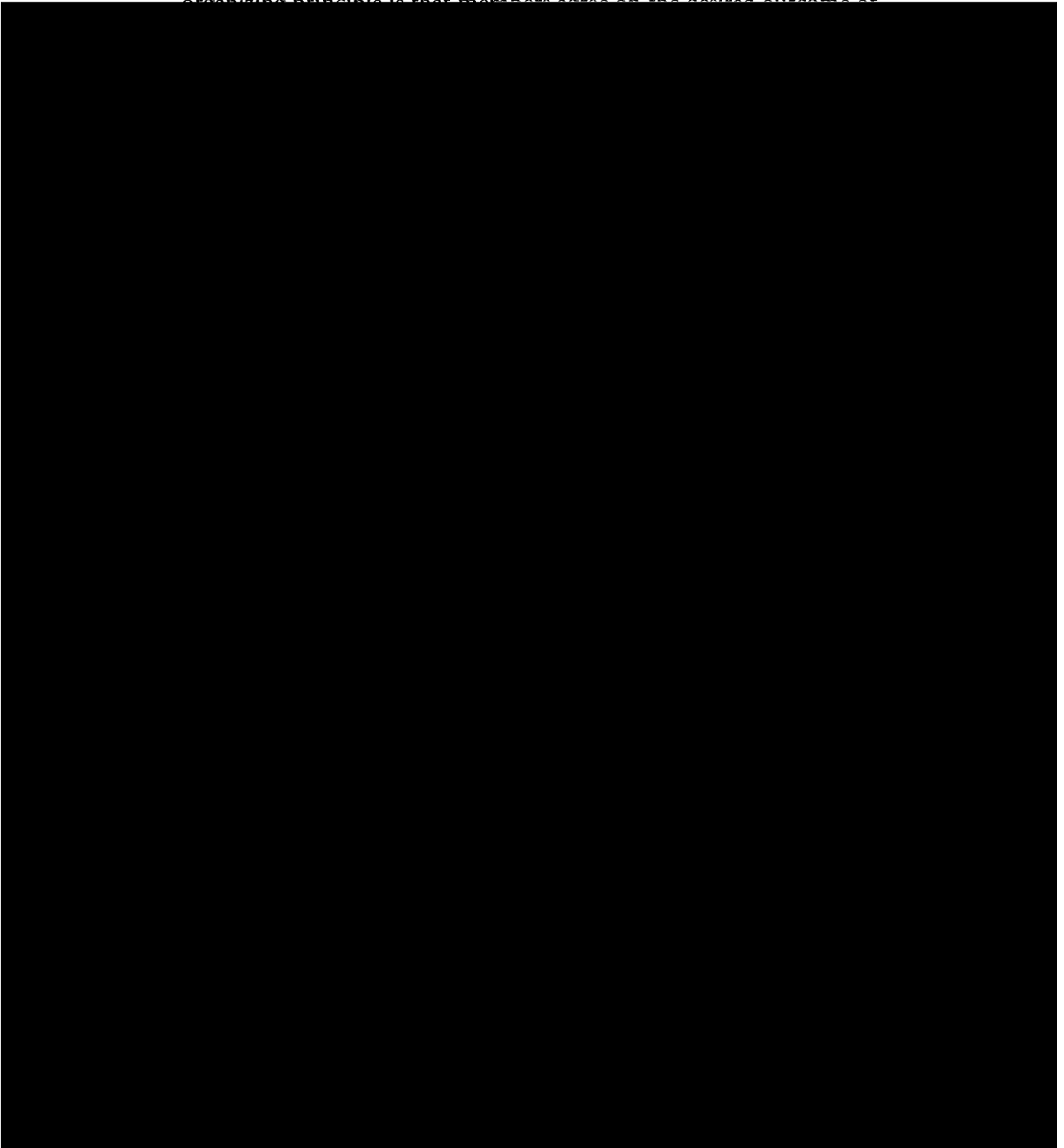
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My hope is that religious people will be among those who lead in the call for a more compassionate and just world-view. In particular, I



consider to be on the far political left) to an organization associated with televangelist Pat Robertson (a group many consider to be on the far political right).

The organizing principle of these single-issue coalitions isn't that members modify their beliefs in some way or even affirm one another's faith traditions or philosophies. Further, it isn't that members agree on any other group of issues or any other single policy issue. Instead, the organizing principle is that members agree on the desired outcome of



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pragmatic thing when they strive to ensure that everyone has a voice in the public square and when they make certain exceptions so that neo-

