

The Persecution of “Bible Bob”

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Bob listened in disbelief to what he was hearing. “Religion has no place in this city government!” the councilman brazenly asserted. “Police officers, firefighters, school teachers, workers in City Hall – none of them has any business promoting her or his religious beliefs on the job. I won’t stand for it and the people of this great city won’t stand for it!”

The great city was not Beijing. Neither was it Havana nor P’yongyang. No, this was Los Angeles, the city of angels. Now, potentially, the city of gagged angels.

Rewind the tape several months. After 37 years on the Los Angeles police force, Bob had risen from patrol officer to the LAPD's second-in-command. Bob was also a committed Christian, an elder at his church, a man who lived out his faith on the job so unflinchingly that some of his colleagues nicknamed him “Bible Bob” and the “Leader of the God Squad.”

Sounds humorous, but the Los Angeles media found it anything but funny. In the wake of the Rodney King fiasco and in light of the inevitable exit of then-police chief Daryl Gates, attention turned to Bob as the Department’s heir-apparent. The media began digging into Bob’s past, unearthing what they considered to be smoking gun proof of Bob’s lack of fitness for the top cop position. Among the evidence they exhumed was a six-hour tape series, recorded by Bob for his church in 1977, entitled “The True Masculine Role.” In the series, Bob taught that the practice of homosexuality is “against God’s order,” that spanking is a valuable disciplinary tool for parents, that abortion is murder, and that the Bible has defined a role for men to fulfill. Filtered through their secular worldview, the newspapers reported that Bob advocated in this series the beating of children, the demeaning of women, and the selective enforcement of laws.

Citing anonymous sources, the media also reported other findings from their investigation, among them, that:

- Bob pressured officers to attend church services and ordered officers to get down on their knees and pray. (Bob retorted that this simply was untrue.)

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- Bob favored Christian officers for promotions and choice job assignments, even manipulating their test scores to do so. (Bob called the allegation nonsense and a “specious red herring.”)
- Bob consulted his church about the ethics of arresting pro-life demonstrators. (Bob said in response: “I’m not ashamed of seeking counsel. I’m proud to say that when I come up against moral dilemmas I seek the counsel of elders of my church and of other law enforcement officials.”)

For his part, Bob steadfastly defended and explained his workplace Christianity. “I hope I’m known on the job as someone who is fair, as someone who works hard, as someone who keeps his word, and as someone who has the humility to listen to people under me. But do I go to work and proselytize? No. I think that would be an abuse of public office.”

This explanation notwithstanding, an alarmed city councilman launched a full-scale investigation into how Bob's religious convictions may have affected his police duties. With the support of Mayor Tom Bradley and other members of the Council, the investigation began immediately.

Chief Daryl Gates headed one part of that investigation, eventually concluding that there was “no evidence of wrongdoing” in Bob’s conduct and recommending that no disciplinary action be taken. A separate investigative commission interviewed several recently-promoted officers. Witness after witness – six in all – swore under oath that (1) Bob never improperly injected his religious views into police department business and (2) they had been given promotions without inquiry into their personal convictions. In the end, the commission found no substantiation for any of the media allegations, excepting one: Bob did permit clerical members of the LAPD to wear crosses on their uniforms.

As all this was unfolding, the media followed Bob wherever they could. They ambushed him outside his house and at work. They mobbed him at church. They demanded that he respond to every allegation that surfaced. Bob sought a court order to enjoin the harassment and the baseless investigations, but a federal judge denied his request. Now, a day after that judicial denial, a member of the city council was introducing legislation that would prohibit any city employee from promoting religious beliefs on the job.

Exhausted from this ordeal and nearing retirement age, Bob’s inclination is to call it quits and serve God elsewhere.

What Should Bob Do?