No. 08-846

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

NAVAJO NATION, *et al.*,

Petitioners,

v.

UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE, *et al.*,

Respondents.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

BRIEF OF THE FRIENDS COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL LEGISLATION, THE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS, THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR AMISH RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, GRADYE PARSONS AS STATED CLERK OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.), THE RUTHERFORD INSTITUTE, AND THE PRESIDING BISHOP OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH AS *AMICI CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Cases

Statutes

Other Authorities

IDENTITY & INTEREST OF *AMICI*[1]

The Friends Committee on National Legislation ("FCNL") is a Quaker lobby in the public interest, and the largest peace lobby in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1943 by members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), FCNL staff and volunteers work with a nationwide network of tens of thousands of people from many different races, religions, and cultures to advocate social and economic justice, religious freedom, peace, and good government. The Religious Society of Friends has been deeply committed to religious freedom since its founding in England in the 1650s. One of its prominent early members founded Pennsylvania to be a haven of religious freedom and his concepts were reflected in the First Amendment protections of religious freedom.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is a membership organization of elected leaders of religious congregations in the United States representing approximately 67,000 Catholic sisters.

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[1] Pursuant to Rule 37.2, all parties were given timely notice and consented to the filing of this brief. Pursuant to Rule 37.6, no party or counsel to any party authored any part of this brief or made any monetary contribution intended to fund the preparation or submission of the brief. No person other than the amicus curiae and their counsel made any monetary contribution to the preparation or submission of this brief.

It has a deep belief in religious freedom and respect for religious rituals of Native Americans.

The National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom was formed at a national meeting of friends of the Amish held at the University of Chicago in 1967 in response to the facts that the Amish throughout the United States were experiencing many governmental impositions, and that Amish religious beliefs often prevent them from defending themselves in legal proceedings. The National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom has undertaken the defense of constitutional rights of the Amish in many cases throughout the United States. Of particular note in this instance is ist role in the representation of the Amish respondents in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972), a case central to the issues that the petitioner seeks to have reviewed.

Gradye Parsons, as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, is the senior continuing officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a national Christian denomination with nearly 2.3 million members in more than 10,000 congregations, organized into 173 presbyteries under the jurisdiction of 16 synods. Through its antecedent religious bodies, it has existed as an organized religious denomination within the current boundaries of the United States since 1706. This brief is consistent with the policies adopted by the General Assembly regarding the free exercise of religion clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The religious

liberty and church autonomy guarantees of this clause are foundational to our understanding of the relationship between the church and state. The General Assembly has interpreted that the First Amendment applies when a person's right to express their religion is substantially burdened by actions of the federal government. Additionally, since the end of the Second World War, Presbyterian General Assemblies have consistently taken progressive positions on issues affecting Native Americans. An area of abiding concern for Presbyterians is that Native Americans have full freedom to practice their religion. The 200th General Assembly (1988) directed: That the PC (U.S.A.), as a matter of policy, sign on as amicus curiae to briefs that argue for the protection of First Amendment rights to practice land theologies, and that the PC (U.S.A.) join with other churches, civil liberties organizations, and traditional Indian people in an effort to bring to national awareness the gross violations of the First Amendment rights of traditional Indian People. The General Assembly does not claim to speak for all Presbyterians, nor are its decisions binding on the membership of the Presbyterian Church. The General Assembly is the highest legislative and interpretive body of the denomination, and the final point of decision in all disputes. As such, its statements are considered worthy of respect and prayerful consideration of all the denomination's members.

The Rutherford Institute is an international civil liberties and human rights organization headquartered in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Founded in 1982 by its President, John W. Whitehead, the Institute specializes in providing legal representation without charge to individuals whose civil liberties are threatened or violated. In particular, The Rutherford Institute provides representation and counsel to persons whose rights to freely exercise their religion have been violated, and on numerous occasions has presented claims in state and federal courts asserting violations of the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. The Institute also strives to educate the public about constitutional and human rights issues. The Rutherford Institute not only has represented parties in proceedings before this Court, but also has filed amicus curiae briefs in many of this Court's cases involving individual civil liberties.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, is the Chief Pastor of this hierarchical religious denomination of over 2 million members in some 7700 worshipping congregations in the United States and 16 other countries. The Episcopal Church has a significant ministry to Native Americans throughout the United States and maintains a "Navajo Area Mission" of members of that Nation on its reservation in parts of the States of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The issues in this case involving the interpretation of RFRA are, moreover, of significance to the Church beyond its ministry to Native Americans and extend into numerous other contexts.

ARGUMENT

I. A Coherent Definition Of Substantial Burden Under Federal Civil Rights Laws Is Vital To Protect The Vitality Of Religious Expression In The United States.

The right of individuals to exercise a wide variety of religious belief is a central aspect of our Nation's protection of fundamental rights. The *amici*, both as religious organizations and as organizations concerned with the free exercise of religion, have direct concern for the ability of persons of all religious traditions to practice as their faith dictates. Federal and state laws that protect the free exercise of religion are therefore of great and immediate significance to them.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb *et seq.*, and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc *et seq.*, both provide a well-established mechanism to balance the important interests of religious exercise with the interests of the State. However, that balancing takes place only after the religious practitioner establishes that the governmental action in question will "substantially burden" its religious practice. This concept of substantial burden is thus the threshold issue; unless it is crossed, there is no balancing of competing interests and therefore no opportunity to protect legitimate religious activity.

The present split among the Circuits as to the standard to be applied when determining what constitutes a substantial burden on religious exercise, and the extraordinarily limited scope that the Ninth Circuit established, is therefore of great significance. Such a narrow and, we submit, incorrect reading of the term prevents consideration of these competing interests and thereby inappropriately limits the application of those statutes to a narrower scope than mandated by their text and by Congress' purpose in enacting them.

Amici will not reiterate the arguments of the Petitioners, with which they agree. We seek to add our voices to theirs in requesting that the Court clearly articulate a standard that would give effect to the words and intent of these statutes and provide essential protection to the expression of religion. We believe that an understanding of the scope of religious practices by the bodies that the *amici* represent and the necessity of protection will assist the Court in deciding whether to grant certiorari.

II. Interpretative Decisions Regarding "Substantial Burdens" Under The Religious Freedom Restoration Act Also Affect Claims Under The Religious Land Use And Institutionalized Persons Act And State Religious Freedom Laws.

While RFRA was held to apply only to the federal government in *City of Boerne v. Flores*, 521 U.S. 507 (1997), its substantial burden and

compelling interest test has been held to be the "same standard" as that of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc(a)(1); *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao Do Vegetal*, 546 U.S. 418, 436 (2006). Thus, the substantial burden standard enunciated by the Ninth Circuit has implications for all land use and institutionalized persons issues involving state and local governments.

Several States have also enacted Religious Freedom Restoration Acts or similar statutes of their own that rely on a "substantial burden" analysis: Alabama (ALA. CONST. Art. I, § 3.01); Connecticut (CONN. GEN. STAT. § 52-571b *et seq.*); Florida (West's F.S.A. § 761.01 *et seq.*); Idaho (I.C. § 73-401 *et seq.*); Illinois (775 I.L.C.S. 35/1 *et seq.*); New Mexico (N.M.S.A. § 28-22-1 *et seq.*); Oklahoma (51 OKL. ST. ANN. § 251 *et seq.*); Pennsylvania (71 P.S. § 2401 *et seq.*); Rhode Island (GEN. LAWS § 42-80.1-1 *et seq.*); South Carolina (S.C.C.A. § 1-32-20 *et seq.*); and Texas (V.T.C.A. CIVIL PRACTICE AND REMEDIES CODE, T.5 § 110.001, *et seq.*).

Some state courts also rely upon federal RFRA and RLUIPA precedent in the interpretation and application of their own RFRAs. *See, e.g., Cambodian Buddhist Soc. of Connecticut, Inc. v. Planning and Zoning Com'n of Town of Newtown*, 941 A.2d 868 (Conn. 2008); *Warner v. City of Boca Raton*, 887 So. 2d 1023 (Fla. 2004).

Still other State Supreme Courts have interpreted their own constitutions by referencing this standard and federal precedent. Among the

states holding that their state constitutions still require application of the strict scrutiny standard to religious liberty claims are Indiana, *City Chapel Evangelical Free Inc. v. City of South Bend ex rel. Dept. of Redevelopment,* 744 N.E.2d 443 (Ind. 2001); Minnesota, *Odenthal v. Minnesota Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists*, 649 N.W.2d 426 (Minn. 2002); Missouri, *Oliver v. State Tax Commission Of Missouri,* 37 S.W.3d 243 (Mo. 2001); Ohio, *Humphrey v. Lane,* 728 N.E.2d 1039 (Ohio 2000); Washington, *First Covenant Church of Seattle v. City of Seattle,* 840 P.2d 174 (Wash. 1992); and Wisconsin; *State v. Miller,* 549 N.W.2d 235 (Wis. 1996).

The application of all such laws is impacted by the current conflict with respect to the "substantial burden" standard and the Ninth Circuit's decision.

III. The Restrictive "Substantial Burden" Standard Of The Ninth Circuit And Unsettled Circuit Law Unreasonably Restricts The Applicability Of Religious Freedom Laws To Protect A Wide Variety Of Religious Activity.

The petitioners carefully lay out the widely varying definitions of substantial burden that are currently being applied by the Circuits and *amici* will not repeat their arguments. However, there are certain clear flaws in the Ninth Circuit's new definition that we as religious bodies will demonstrate.

a. The new Ninth Circuit "substantial burden" definition would permit a wide range of governmental action to obstruct the free exercise of religion.

The Ninth Circuit panel held that a substantial burden is one that "prevent[s] the plaintiff from engaging in [religious] conduct or having a religious experience," Pet. App. 146a (quoting *Bryant v. Gomez*, 46 F.3d 948, 949 (9th Cir. 1995) (internal quotation marks omitted) (alterations in original), and understood that authorizing the discharge of reclaimed sewage on the San Francisco Peaks would substantially burden the tribes' religious exercise under both Ninth Circuit precedent and the ordinary meaning of the phrase. However, the court *en banc* reinterpreted the phrase to adopt a narrower meaning, limiting it to the burdens imposed in the specific factual contexts of *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963), and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972). Pet. App. 7a. It held:

> Under RFRA, a "substantial burden" is imposed only when individuals are forced to choose between following the tenets of their religion and receiving a governmental benefit (*Sherbert*) or coerced to act contrary to their religious beliefs by the threat of criminal or civil sanctions (*Yoder*).

Pet. App. 20a. Since spraying sewage water on the San Francisco Peaks would not condition any government benefit on abstaining from religious conduct, nor would it prohibit petitioners from

engaging in such exercise upon pain of official sanction, the burden was therefore not "substantial."

As noted by the petitioners, this test is at odds with the statute's plain language and its congressional purpose. It is also not based on any actual language in *Sherbert* or *Yoder*, neither of which used the term "substantial burden." It shifts the issue of what constitutes a substantial burden under RFRA from a case-by-case inquiry into the impact on the religious practice at issue to the very different question of the *nature of the governmental action* that creates the burden, limiting it to the deprivation of governmental benefits or criminal or civil coercion. *Sherbert* cannot be interpreted to support such an approach, since that decision focused its inquiry squarely on the effect of a governmental action on the religious practice at issue, and not on the *form* of the governmental action:

> But this is only the beginning, not the end, of our inquiry. For '(i)f the purpose or effect of a law is to impede the observance of one or all religions . . . , that law is constitutionally invalid even though the burden may be characterized as being only indirect.'

Sherbert, 374 U.S. at 403-4 (footnote and citations omitted). Similarly, the *Yoder* Court extensively reviewed Amish history and religious belief and practice. 406 U.S. at 216-18. The shift of the focus of inquiry from the effect on religious belief to the type of governmental regulation cannot be

supported by these precedents.

The *en banc* majority, ignoring the statutory language covering all acts of the federal government, has simply written out of the statute innumerable types of governmental actions that could burden religion. The Ninth Circuit's standard would be at odds with the decisions of various other federal circuits and state supreme courts that have not adopted such a binary approach to determining whether a burden is substantial.

Desecration of holy sites, the example presented in the Petition, is but one example. The history of religion's often tumultuous relationship with the government is replete with examples of governmental destruction of religious buildings and sacred objects. The Ninth Circuit's standard would allow such actions because while the burden would be severe and certainly "substantial," as that term is commonly understood, they would not render religious exercise punishable by sanctions or condition any government benefit upon its avoidance. This is *reductio ad absurdum*, as the modern equivalent of such actions—the government's exercise of its eminent domain powers—have been used to stifle religious exercise by simply taking religious property. *See, e.g., Albanian Associated Fund v. Township of Wayne,* 2007 WL 2904194, at *7 (D.N.J. 2007); *Cottonwood Christian Center v. Cypress Redevelopment Agency,*

218 F. Supp. 2d 1203, 1226-1227 (C.D. Cal. 2002).[2]

Prisoners are particularly affected by this ruling, as RFRA protects inmates in federal institutions and RLUIPA guards such rights in state prisons. Given the fact that all aspects of daily life in penal institutions are controlled by the government, an analysis that finds burdens on religious exercise only in the sorts of actions enumerated by the Ninth Circuit would negate the body of law balancing religious freedom with legitimate governmental interests in this context.

The Third Circuit noted this difficulty in *Washington v. Klem*, where it understood that "transferring these definitions, which often arise in the denial of unemployment benefits, to a prison setting has not always been seamless because of the different factual scenarios presented by the institutional milieu."[3] 497 F.3d 272, 278 (3d Cir.

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[2] Both cases involved RLUIPA, which is similarly limited to actions that "substantially burden" religious exercise. 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc(a)(1) ("No government shall impose or implement a land use regulation in a manner that imposes a substantial burden on the religious exercise of a person, ...").

[3] The Third Circuit also noted that applying this Court's holdings to the RLUIPA context "runs into trouble . . . because Supreme Court precedent with respect to the definition of 'substantial burden' in the Free Exercise Clause context has not always been consistent." *Washington,* 497 F.3d at 278.

2007). After an extended analysis of the meaning of the term "substantial burden" under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, the court held that a limitation on the number of books inmates may possess in their cells did substantially burden the plaintiff's religious exercise. This would not comport with the new Ninth Circuit standard.

Nor can the standard be coherently applied to the land use branch of RLUIPA. In *Westchester Day School v. Village of Mamaroneck*, 504 F.3d 338 (2d Cir. 2007), the Second Circuit found that the denial of a land use permit to expand a Jewish school constituted a substantial burden on the schools' religious exercise because there was no viable alternative that it deemed adequate to teach its students. The court observed that the *Sherbert* framework was simply not applicable:

> [I]n the context of land use, a religious institution is not ordinarily faced with the same dilemma of choosing between religious precepts and government benefits. When a municipality denies a religious institution the right to expand its facilities, it is more difficult to speak of substantial pressure to change religious behavior, because in light of the denial the renovation simply cannot proceed.

Id. at 348-9. The religious body was not coerced into performing any act contrary to their religious beliefs by the threat of criminal or civil sanctions as in *Yoder*. As is often the case in land use issues, the governmental action that burdens religious exercise

by withholding necessary permissions does not neatly fit into either of the two narrow categories circumscribed by the new Ninth Circuit definition.

The limitation of substantial burden to the particular fact patterns involved in *Sherbert* and *Yoder* has the effect of distorting the proper inquiry into the nature of the effect of governmental action on religious exercise. Neither *Sherbert* nor *Yoder* suggest that the Court was attempting to define the term substantial burden or that their particular fact patterns should define the outer limits of protected religious exercise, and they should not be used to do so.

As both *Washington* and *Westchester Day School* (among many other examples)—read in contrast with the decision below—demonstrate, guidance is sorely needed.

b. The new Ninth Circuit "substantial burden" definition misunderstands the nature of religious activity and thus the nature of the protection embodied in RFRA, RLUIPA and State RFRAs.

A central aspect of the *en banc* majority's reasoning was that the interior "spiritual" experience of religion is not to be protected by RFRA. As the majority stated:

> Thus, the sole effect of the artificial snow is on the Plaintiffs' subjective spiritual

> experience. That is, the presence of the artificial snow on the Peaks is offensive to the Plaintiffs' feelings about their religion and will decrease the spiritual fulfillment Plaintiffs get from practicing their religion on the mountain. Nevertheless, a government action that decreases the spirituality, the fervor, or the satisfaction with which a believer practices his religion is not what Congress has labeled a "substantial burden"—a term of art chosen by Congress to be defined by reference to Supreme Court precedent—on the free exercise of religion.

Pet. App. 6a, 7a. Such subjective religious experience, the court held, could not be "substantially burden[ed]" within the meaning of this Court's precedents because there was no threat of sanctions or conditioning of government benefits. *Id.*

To claim that the subjective experience of religious practice is unworthy of government concern is to entirely ignore the very nature of religious practice. Actions are religious precisely because of their subjective spiritual nature. Eating bread and drinking wine become the act of communion with Christ because of the spiritual convictions of the recipient. Sitting in silence waiting for the inspiration of the divine becomes "worship" to Quakers precisely because of their internal spiritual experience of the act. Eating or not eating certain foods at certain times is a religious act because of the internal subjective

purpose that the believer has. This is true of virtually all actions done for a religious purpose. This is the essence of the "exercise" of religion.

As Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern liberal theology, wrote:

> Religion is the outcome neither of the fear of death, nor of the fear of God. It answers a deep need in man. It is neither a metaphysic, nor a morality, but above all and essentially an intuition and a feeling. . . . Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: rather it is that they are derived from it. Religion is the miracle of direct relationship with the infinite; and dogmas are the reflection of this miracle.

FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, ADDRESSES ON RELIGION (1799).

To suggest, as the *en banc* majority does, that the government is free to ignore the "subjective" spiritual nature of religious practice without any consideration of the interests of such religious practice is to set a dangerous precedent. Requiring religious claimants to demonstrate that an "objective" spiritual experience—whatever that might mean—was burdened will be to place finders of fact in an unenviable and constitutionally impermissible position: to become arbiters of religious truth. This is not permitted.

> The religious views espoused by respondents might seem incredible, if not preposterous, to

> most people. But if those doctrines are subject to trial before a jury charged with finding their truth or falsity, then the same can be done with the religious beliefs of any sect. When the triers of fact undertake that task, they enter a forbidden domain.

United States v. Ballard, 322 U.S. 78, 87 (1944).

IV. A Proper Application Of The Compelling Interest Test Would Meet The Congressional Purpose Of Protecting The Free Exercise Of Religion Without Overwhelming Governmental Activities.

RFRA, RLUIPA and the state RFRAs provide a mechanism for the balancing of the fundamental interest in free exercise of religion with other important governmental interests. Congress specifically found in RFRA that:

> (1) the framers of the Constitution, recognizing free exercise of religion as an unalienable right, secured its protection in the First Amendment to the Constitution; [and]
>
> (5) the compelling interest test as set forth in prior Federal court rulings is a workable test for striking sensible balances between religious liberty and competing prior governmental interests.

42 U.S.C. § 2000bb(a). This compelling interest test, which requires that the substantial burden "is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest" and "is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest," *id.* § 2000bb-1(a), does not automatically mean that any religious exercise must be free of government interference. It provides a mechanism "for striking sensible balances between religious liberty and competing prior governmental interests." *Id.* § 2000bb(a).

As Justice O'Connor wrote in *Employment Div., Dept. of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith*, citing extensive precedent:

> To say that a person's right to free exercise has been burdened, of course, does not mean that he has an absolute right to engage in the conduct. . . . [W]e have respected both the First Amendment's express textual mandate and the governmental interest in regulation of conduct by requiring the government to justify any substantial burden on religiously motivated conduct by a compelling state interest and by means narrowly tailored to achieve that interest.

494 U.S. 872, 894-95 (1990) (O'Connor, J., concurring).

With respect to religious liberty questions, the application of this test has far more often than not resulted in findings that uphold governmental action. In an empirical study of the application of

the strict scrutiny standard from 1990 to 2003, the author found 73 final published decisions applying the test to religious liberty cases under the Free Exercise Clause, RFRA and RLUIPA. In 53 of those cases, the government action survived strict scrutiny and was upheld. Winkler, *Fatal in Theory and Strict in Fact: An Empirical Analysis of Strict Scrutiny in the Federal Courts*, 59 VAND. L. REV. 793, 857-58 (2006). And when examining only statutory RFRA and RLUIPA cases the challenged laws were upheld at an even higher rate: 72%. *Id.* at 860.

The *en banc* majority's conclusion that to affirm a standard other than the sanction/benefit test would subject the government "to the personalized oversight of millions of citizens" and that "[e]ach citizen would hold an individual veto to prohibit the government action," Pet. App. 7a, is therefore unfounded. It does not comport with the realities of the application of the strict scrutiny test to religious liberty claims and there is no need to prevent legitimate claims of substantial (but not absolute) infringement of religious liberty from being reviewed under the strict scrutiny test.

CONCLUSION

Amici believe that this case has vital significance for the religious observance of all Americans. We therefore urge the Court to grant certiorari.

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