



Attempted Beheading in Syria Blamed on Tulsa Church

In a case with many constitutional questions, the Oklahoma Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, sent back to district court a case involving the baptism of a Syrian immigrant who had converted from Islam to Christianity. He is suing the First Presbyterian Church of Tulsa (shown) because it had published on the Internet the fact that he was baptized in the church, against his wishes he says, and when he went back to Syria to get married, he was tortured and threatened with death for converting.

The Muslim convert, known in the court documents simply as John Doe, so as to protect his identity from retaliation by Islamic extremists, argued that the church's decision to post his name and his baptism on the Internet, against his wishes, led to him almost getting killed in Syria. According to Doe's story, as related in the case *John Doe v. The First Presbyterian Church of Tulsa, Oklahoma and James Miller*, "As part of what he refers to as his westernization, Appellant made the decision to convert from Islam to Christianity." Doe came to America in 1983 when he was 12 years old. James Miller is the minister who performed the baptism.

As part of that conversion process, Doe requested that the First Presbyterian Church of Tulsa baptize him, but he did not ask to join the church. In the Supreme Court decision to remand the case back to district court for trial, his lawyers cited his allegation that he asked the church not publicize his conversion and baptism. "Appellant alleges he made Appellees aware of the need for confidentiality throughout the conversion process, as he was planning to return to Syria shortly thereafter." His baptism took place on December 30, 2012, "during a service that was open to members and guests of the church, but was not televised."

Doe claimed that the church promised him it would not release information about his baptism. Soon after the baptism, he returned to Syria to be married. But then four days after the wedding, he claims, he was taken from his house by several men, including an uncle, who had learned about his baptism on the Internet. Doe said it is part of Arab culture to investigate the family when a wedding is about to take place. I spoke to Adam Soltani, the Oklahoma director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), who confirmed that this is standard practice. According to Soltani, it is common in the Arab world to research the background of a potential husband to make sure that he does not have a criminal record. If Doe's story is true, his assailants found out that he had converted to Christianity by reading the church's website.

According to Doe, he was tortured for several days, but when they took him out to be beheaded (for leaving Islam), he was able to grab a gun, kill his uncle, and escape. He clandestinely made his way back to the United States, where he had to undergo multiple surgeries to repair injuries he had received. Soltani admitted that killing someone for leaving Islam does happen in Muslim countries, but he protested that that is not an official part of the Islamic religion, nor is it the law in Syria.

Doe is seeking damages from the church for his medical expenses. Tulsa County District Judge Daman Cantrell sided with the church when asked to dismiss the suit on the ground that courts lack jurisdiction to hear such claims because it involves a religious matter. But the Oklahoma High Court disagreed, sending it back to district court for trial or other resolution.

Interestingly, Doe never joined the church, which is not necessary in the Presbyterian Church to be baptized there. As the court noted, Doe's "lack of membership was a core facet of his argument before the trial court that he had not consented to the FPC's ecclesiastical jurisdiction." But they added,



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“While Appellant never became a member of FPC, it is unquestioned that he consented — and in fact specifically requested — to be baptized into the Christian faith at FPC.” Doe’s complaint concerned the church’s “publication” of his baptism on the Internet, which he claimed “resulted in his relatives’ discovery of his baptism while he was in Syria.”

In its defense, the church argued, “The bulletin, or Order of Worship, is a written publication, customarily distributed to attendees of Sunday worship services, delivered to individuals who are unable to attend services in person, and made available on the Church’s website. Plaintiff’s name was listed in the bulletin the week after his baptism in keeping with the tradition, custom, and practice of the Church. Plaintiff never requested that the Church depart from its normal practices in conducting his baptism.”

This is in accordance with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): “This is the practice and custom because of the Presbyterian belief that Baptism, as one of two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church, is a declaration of faith to be celebrated publicly. This has been the custom and practice of the Church for decades.”

Meanwhile, Doe is living in Tulsa under an assumed name, because he claims he is still receiving death threats from those who have a different custom and practice — to kill those who leave the Islamic religion.

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