



American Association for Single People

Protecting the rights of single people, unmarried couples, and nonmarital families

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Federal Court Fuels Religious Controversy

*Freedom **OF** Religion vs. Freedom **FROM** Religion*

Judges gives business owners in 9 western states
the green light to reject “sinners” as customers

A federal appeals court yesterday ruled that business owners may carry their religious beliefs into the commercial marketplace and may refuse to do business with “sinners.” If the ruling is not overturned, landlords and other establishments may impose a religious test on consumers and refuse to provide goods or services to those who fail the test.

The case involves a landlord in Alaska who told the court that he regularly refuses to rent to unmarried couples because he believes that unmarried cohabitation is a sin and that if forced to rent to them that he would be aiding and abetting the sin. In a 2 to 1 decision in favor of the landlord, the court concluded that the City of Anchorage and the State of Alaska may not enforce civil rights laws outlawing marital status discrimination against landlords who have contrary religious beliefs.

Judge Michael Hawkins, who filed a dissenting opinion in *Thomas v. Anchorage Equal Rights Commission*, warned of dire consequences that will result from the ruling: “Its potential for harm will be seen when a landlord in this circuit refuses, on the basis of religious beliefs . . . to rent or sell housing to divorced individuals, interracial couples, victims of domestic abuse seeking shelter, or single men or women living together simply because they cannot afford to do otherwise.”

Los Angeles attorney Thomas F. Coleman -- a singles’ rights advocate who has participated in similar cases in Alaska, California, Illinois, and Michigan – predicted that the *Thomas* case will eventually be overturned by the United States Supreme Court. Coleman is the executive director of the American Association for Single People.

“This is not Iran where judges routinely use the power of the government to force religious beliefs on the citizens,” Coleman said. “In the USA we believe in separation of church and state, but apparently these federal judges don’t like that part of the Constitution.” Some 80 million unmarried adults in this country, including about 6 million unmarried couples, must rely on the courts to protect their constitutional right to freedom from religion as well as their rights of privacy and association.

AASP plans to file a friend-of-the-court brief if a rehearing is granted by a full panel of 11 appellate judges. The brief will focus on the detrimental impact on millions of unmarried tenants in Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Montana, Idaho, and Nevada, if federal courts legalize religious discrimination in commercial transactions.