

## Hamilton and Griffin on Rights

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[Guest Blog](#) Apr 13, 2015 | [Janet Heimlich](#)

## Guest Blog: CFFP Update: In the Wake of Idaho Granting Parents “Fundamental Rights”: What Does It Mean for Children Being Raised in Zealous “Faith Healing” Groups and Households?

Last month, I [testified](#) in front of an Idaho Senate panel against [House bill 113](#), known as the “parents’ rights” bill. I was there representing my nonprofit organization, the [Child-Friendly Faith Project](#) and believe that we, along with other child advocates, convinced lawmakers to improve that bill. But now that Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter has signed the parents’ rights bill into law, we wonder, have we lost the fight to save the lives of Idaho’s children who suffer every day due to four religious exemptions that allow parents to “treat” their sick children with only prayer and other religious rituals?

We’ve all heard the stories and tried to comprehend how they could happen—stories of children ailing, and even dying, from treatable conditions from diabetes to infection to cancer that surgery or chemotherapy could have cured. I’ve read of cases in which a baby died from a nosebleed; a toddler died in agony from a bowel obstruction; a teenage girl died from a ruptured esophagus after repeated vomiting when she got food poisoning; a friend of mind is missing a leg because no one took her to a doctor when she got an infection in her knee.

These children suffered for the simple reason that their caretakers—zealous in their beliefs about divine intervention—refused to provide them medical care and, instead, insisted on praying over them or tossing drops of oil on them or turning to a religious authority to perform these rituals. Sometimes an entire faith community joined in. But while family, friends, and neighbors were appealing to a higher power, no one did what it took to give these children a chance at life—they didn’t call a doctor or 911.

The shocking news is that most states have religious exemptions in their child maltreatment statutes that allow this kind of neglect to go on. Still, many states have limited those exemptions or prosecutors have figured out a way to get around them. Some states—usually ones that have seen well-publicized tragedies—have repealed those exemptions completely.

But not Idaho. In fact, heretofore, Idaho appears to be one state that has absolutely no compassion toward these vulnerable children.

One of the most beautiful states in the country, Idaho boasts such marvels as the Lewis and Clark trail. It’s called the “gem state” because just about every kind of gemstone has been found there. But as of late, Idaho has gained the dubious distinction of caring so much about so-called “religious freedom” that it’s willing to sacrifice its young for this ideology.

This attitude was crystallized in an interview with [AlJazeera America](#), when Idaho Rep. Christie Perry of Nampa (home to many members of the zealous faith-healing group the Followers of Christ) said, “If I want to let my child be with God why is that wrong?”

Now House Bill 113 has passed and parents have been statutorily granted “fundamental rights.” It’s hard to say just what impact this law will have on children who are being raised by parents who eschew medical care for religious reasons. As I recently [blogged](#), the Child-Friendly Faith Project is concerned about numerous possible outcomes, including

- parents will be even more emboldened to refuse their children medical care,
- judges and juries will be unable to make decisions to keep vulnerable children safe,
- teachers, doctors, and others will be intimidated to report abusive and neglectful parents to authorities, and
- Idaho lawmakers will be discouraged from filing bills to repeal religious exemptions.

It’s that last point that has us particularly concerned. Will legislators—even those who have shown an interest in repealing these exemptions in the past—now see such efforts as futile? Should they?

The answer is no, because if there is one victory we can claim in our fight toward defeating House Bill 113, it was convincing lawmakers to redraft the parents’ rights bill so it included language that basically exempts parents from being granted “fundamental rights” if they have abused or neglected their children.

Sure, under current law, parents in the Followers of Christ are still legally shielded from prosecution, and social workers are essentially barred from getting those parents’ sick children medical care. But the good news is, if Idaho repeals its religious exemptions in four criminal and civil statutes next session, those children will be protected.

Why? Because their parents won’t be able to get away with denying them medical care and claim they had a “fundamental right” to do so. Children’s rights in Idaho have been curtailed by the passing of the parents’ rights law, but if the state repeals its religious “faith healing” exemptions, at least children in zealous faith healing sects have a chance at life.

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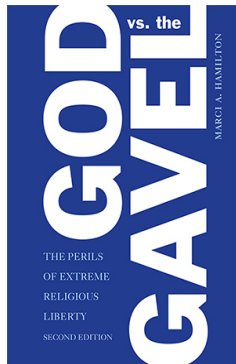
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### Author Description



Janet Heimlich is the founder and Executive Director of the Child-Friendly Faith Project, a national nonprofit organization that educates the public about religious and cultural child maltreatment. She is also the author of *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment*.

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