

ACLU SIDES WITH SUPREMACIST ON RIGHT TO OBTAIN LAW LICENSE

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White supremacist Matthew Hale 's bid to practice law in Illinois has received a boost from the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, which has filed a legal brief in support of Hale's petition to obtain a law license.

In a legal motion accepted Monday by the state Supreme Court, the ACLU argues that denying Hale a law license on the basis of racist beliefs is a violation of his 1st Amendment rights.

Hale, 28, and leader of the East Peoria-based World Church of the Creator, has been denied admission to the bar three times in a review process overseen by the Supreme Court. On Aug. 2, Hale's attorney asked the high court to review his client's petition, which asks the court to clear the way for him to practice law.

The court has not yet decided whether it will hear the case, court officials said.

At the most recent denial, on June 30, a review board said that Hale lacked the moral character to possess a law license because he would not be able to abide by bar rules of professional conduct that forbid racial discrimination.

The ACLU counters that the court should not deny Hale a law license "based on a prediction" that his views may cause him to violate the bar's rules, according to the brief.

"If Mr. Hale misbehaves as a lawyer, there are ways to discipline him and disbar him," said ACLU spokesman Ed Yohnka. "But it is a very dangerous precedent to use someone's speech as a vehicle to prohibit him from the practice of law."

For the ACLU, known for its stance on constitutional issues as well as cases involving minorities, Hale's case poses something of a dilemma.

"Here we are supporting Matt Hale when we spend every single day working against his vision of America," Yohnka said. "But we believe that, if you begin to allow government agencies to chill people's free expression, it won't be long before that is turned on a number of people."

Hale, a graduate of Southern Illinois University Law School in Carbondale, has passed the bar exam. His church, where spree killer Benjamin Smith was once a member, advocates the deportation of Jews and non-whites.

This is not the first time Hale and the ACLU have crossed paths. Hale first approached the group in February with a request for representation, though he later found other counsel, he said. The ACLU later filed a brief in support of Hale's petition before the review board.

"The ACLU recognizes that if it's me today, it could be anybody tomorrow," Hale said.

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