SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE	UNITED STATES
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JOHN H. RAMIREZ,)
Petitioner,)
v.) No. 21-5592
BRYAN COLLIER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,)
TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL)
JUSTICE, ET AL.,)
Respondents.)

Pages: 1 through 106

Place: Washington, D.C.

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1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITE	D STATES
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3	JOHN H. RAMIREZ,)	
4	Petitioner,)	
5	v.)	No. 21-5592
6	BRYAN COLLIER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,)	
7	TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL)	
8	JUSTICE, ET AL.,	
9	Respondents.)	
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12	Washington, D.C.	
13	Tuesday, November 9, 202	1
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15	The above-entitled matter cam	e on for
16	oral argument before the Supreme Cou	irt of the
17	United States at 11:17 a.m.	
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Т	APPEARANCES:
2	SETH KRETZER, ESQUIRE, Houston, Texas; on behalf of
3	the Petitioner.
4	ERIC J. FEIGIN, Deputy Solicitor General,
5	Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; for the
6	United States, as amicus curiae, in support of
7	neither party.
8	JUDD E. STONE, II, Solicitor General, Austin, Texas;
9	on behalf of the Respondents.
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1	PROCEEDINGS
2	(11:17 a.m.)
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll hear
4	argument next today in Case 21-5592, Ramirez
5	versus Collier.
6	Mr. Kretzer.
7	ORAL ARGUMENT OF SETH KRETZER
8	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER
9	MR. KRETZER: Mr. Chief Justice, and
10	may it please the Court:
11	Across Texas's 572 executions spanning
12	four decades, the State's policy was to allow a
13	spiritual advisor to be present in the execution
14	chamber to lay hands on a condemned inmate and
15	to audibly pray.
16	In 2019, that long-standing practice
17	changed suddenly when the State chose to forbid
18	any religion advisor from the execution chamber.
19	Ramirez and other inmates fought to preserve
20	their religious exercise rights to spiritual
21	advisor presence, and while these challenges
22	proceeded, the State withdrew Ramirez's 2020
23	execution date in exchange for withdrawal of his
24	Section 1983 petition.
25	Six months later, the State reset

- 1 Ramirez's execution, followed two months after
- 2 that by a reversion to allowing in chambers
- 3 spiritual advisor presence. The State then
- 4 waited to reveal -- months more to reveal first
- 5 a ban on touch; only later, it banned the writ
- 6 -- spoken word.
- 7 Either the State merely delayed
- 8 revealing these new restrictions or, worse,
- 9 added them piecemeal while Ramirez sought
- 10 redress through the grievance system. Either
- 11 way, the State's actions rendered that system
- 12 unavailable under the PLRA. The State now
- argues that Ramirez's resort to litigation came
- 14 somehow far too late but also six days too
- 15 early.
- TDCJ's own history and practices, as
- well as the current approaches of the federal
- 18 government and states like Alabama, prove that
- 19 Texas's restrictions on touch and prayer are not
- 20 the least restrictive means of furthering its
- 21 proffered execution interests.
- Mr. Ramirez should prevail as a matter
- of law under RLUIPA. If the Court determines,
- 24 however, that the State should be allowed
- another chance to attempt to meet its burden,

- 1 this Court should remand for an evidentiary
- 2 hearing in which both sides may develop the
- 3 record.
- I welcome the Court's questions.
- 5 JUSTICE THOMAS: Counsel, has Mr.
- 6 Ramirez always requested that hands be laid on
- 7 him?
- 8 MR. KRETZER: The answer to your
- 9 question, Justice Thomas, is that is Mr.
- 10 Ramirez's religious belief. There is a sentence
- in the petition I filed in the year 2020 which
- turned out, in light of facts ultimately learned
- by me, to have been incorrect. That was only on
- 14 file for two days before the State asked me to
- 15 dismiss it without prejudice.
- 16 When the matter was refiled, and I had
- 17 an affidavit from Pastor Moore, it was reflected
- 18 appropriately. It would have been amended at
- 19 the time.
- JUSTICE THOMAS: Well, I mean, that's
- 21 an affidavit from Pastor Moore.
- MR. KRETZER: Yes.
- JUSTICE THOMAS: We're talking about
- 24 Mr. Ramirez now.
- 25 If we think that Mr. Ramirez has

- 1 changed his request a number of times and has
- 2 filed last-minute complaints that, as -- and
- 3 that is -- and -- and -- and if we assume that
- 4 that's some indication of gaming the system,
- 5 what should we do with that with respect to
- 6 assessing the sincerity of his beliefs?
- 7 MR. KRETZER: I think, Justice Thomas,
- 8 you can assess the sincerity of Mr. Ramirez's
- 9 belief by looking at the best evidence that
- there is in the record, which is a seriatim, one
- 11 handwritten, signed grievance after another
- 12 repeatedly requesting the same thing --
- JUSTICE THOMAS: Yeah, but I'm --
- 14 MR. KRETZER: -- the ministrations of
- 15 Pastor Moore.
- 16 JUSTICE THOMAS: -- but you have
- 17 people filing grievances --
- 18 MR. KRETZER: Yes.
- 19 JUSTICE THOMAS: -- in non-religious
- 20 contexts, and that's not evidence of their
- 21 religious beliefs. It's evidence that,
- 22 obviously, they don't -- obviously don't want to
- 23 be executed. And they -- and in some instances,
- they're gaming the system.
- I guess my question is, can one's

- 1 repeated filing of complaints, particularly at
- 2 the last minute, not only be seen as evidence of
- 3 gaming of the system but also of the sincerity
- 4 of religious beliefs?
- 5 MR. KRETZER: Well, Justice Thomas, I
- 6 can certainly see how a hypothetical inmate
- 7 perhaps filing a last-minute such request might
- 8 so be construed. I can only speak as Mr.
- 9 Ramirez's attorney, and I do not play games.
- 10 There's no dilatory tactics in this case.
- 11 When the State set the execution date
- in the year 2020, I filed the 1983 lawsuit, and
- 13 the State asked me to dismiss it without
- 14 prejudice. When the State filed again -- got a
- new death warrant in the year 2020, it was only
- 16 -- Mr. Ramirez immediately filed grievances.
- 17 There was no waiting there. And the State
- 18 responded by handing him a copy of this new
- 19 policy they promulgated on April 21, 2021.
- 20 Mr. Ramirez has always, Justice
- 21 Thomas, filed these grievances within days of
- learning -- in that case, he learned from the
- 23 director of chaplaincy that there would be this
- 24 no touch requirement that was suddenly imposed
- 25 in the year 2021.

1	And yet, it was the State that
2	delays there is, I think, a very alarming
3	intention you see in the Riley affidavit the
4	State lodged in their materials where she said
5	that as the execution date gets quicker, the
6	State regards these grievances and tries to
7	process them all the faster.
8	That's not at all what happened here,
9	Justice Thomas. Mr. Ramirez filed his request
10	in Level 2 grievance in July of 2021. The
11	State sat on this for six weeks, until we were
12	right on the cusp of the execution.
13	I would contend, if there's any delay
14	here, Justice Thomas, it's on the part of the
15	State. There's no insincerity as to Mr.
16	Ramirez's consistently stated beliefs, and Mr.
17	Ramirez has repeatedly asked as quickly as
18	possible for the least relief, as he is
19	required to, from the prison system.
20	JUSTICE THOMAS: Thank you.
21	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Counsel, what
22	is your client's position on is it touch
23	anywhere on his body that will satisfy his
24	religious needs?
25	MR. KRETZER: Yes, that's correct.

- 1 Pastor Moore, when he lays his hands on the --
- 2 his congregants, can touch anywhere on the body.
- 3 So, for example, Pastor Moore can touch Mr.
- 4 Ramirez's foot, an extremity on the complete far
- 5 end of the body from the point at which the IV
- 6 line will be inserted into his arm. So, yes,
- 7 that would satisfy the religious exercise.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: How would you
- 9 analyze the case -- is it -- would it be any
- 10 different than how you're analyzing it, in your
- 11 case, if the religious conviction were somewhat
- 12 different and the hand had to be on the
- 13 forehead, on the heart, something like that?
- MR. KRETZER: I can certainly see how
- it might be a little closer, and yet, in such a
- 16 religious exercise, if that was, in fact, what
- 17 the religious exercise generally was, such as we
- have with Pastor Moore and his congregants, then
- 19 touching on the other side of the body I still
- 20 don't think would present a problem because
- there's no touch anywhere near the IV.
- For example, if the prison -- the IV
- 23 is in one arm and the prison doctor's ultimately
- 24 to touch the other arm to monitor pulse, there
- would be no problem with Pastor Moore touching

- 1 that other arm. Similarly, with the head -- as
- 2 the heart. These are still places pretty far
- 3 removed, not as far away as the foot that I
- 4 mentioned, but still pretty far removed from the
- 5 point at which that IV will be injected.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, I don't
- 7 think either the hand or the heart is very far
- 8 removed from the IV injection site.
- 9 MR. KRETZER: They're obviously closer
- 10 to the IV injection site than the foot is. And
- 11 yet, I think the important point, Chief, Mr.
- 12 Chief Justice, is that under RLUIPA, the courts
- are not allowed to rewrite the religious
- 14 exercise for the inmate so as to accommodate
- 15 their religious exercise, as that term is
- 16 narrowly defined under RLUIPA, is that as the
- inmate and his religious precepts dictate.
- 18 Mr. Ramirez does not need any place
- other on the body even closer to the IV site to
- 20 be touched, just the same as Mr. Ramirez's
- 21 religious exercise is not satisfied by what the
- 22 State proposes.
- 23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Right. I'm --
- 24 I'm trying to get a sense of your stand -- the
- 25 standard of review as applied in this situation

- 1 and how, I mean, would -- what would the
- 2 analysis be if, for example, his religious
- 3 beliefs required three -- three people to be
- 4 present?
- 5 MR. KRETZER: Yes. The -- just -- Mr.
- 6 Chief Justice, RLUIPA is specifically designed
- 7 to take these matters of religious exercise up
- 8 on an inmate-by-inmate basis.
- 9 This Court has said in several cases
- 10 the classic rejoinder of bureaucrats throughout
- 11 history, if I make an exception for you, I have
- 12 to make it for everyone. So no exceptions.
- 13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: It's very
- 14 eloquent.
- 15 (Laughter.)
- MR. KRETZER: It was not my words.
- 17 The -- the -- the logic being that this does
- 18 have to be taken up on an inmate-by-inmate
- 19 basis. If some inmate had a genuinely held,
- 20 sincere religious observance and it was to be
- 21 established that this needed to be done at a
- 22 particular point in the body, I guess that might
- 23 be a different case.
- 24 But, to answer your question directly,
- 25 the standard is exactly that from the statute,

1 to take it up on an inmate-by-inmate --2 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: That'll --3 MR. KRETZER: -- basis instead of categorically. 4 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- that'll be the 5 6 next case, and then there will be the next case 7 after that and the next case after that where people are moving the goalposts on their claims 8 9 in order to delay executions. At least that's the State's concern. 10 11 And kind of four issues you need to 12 run through. Sincerity, Justice Thomas's questions get at that. Substantial burden. 13 14 can't just be a burden. It has to be a 15 substantial burden. And then too I want to ask 16 about compelling interest, the State's 17 compelling interest and least restrictive means. 18 So let me just focus on the compelling 19 interest because I think the State's compelling 20 interest here is challenging for us to analyze 21 because I think it is in reducing risk, risk of 2.2 something going wrong in the execution chamber. 23 And I think the State is saying, we 24 want the risk to be zero of a problem. 25 when they were excluding everyone following our

- 1 equal treatment principle that we enshrined in
- 2 -- in Murphy or enforced.
- 3 MR. KRETZER: Okay.
- 4 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: So we want the
- 5 risk to be zero.
- Now that it looks like, okay, well,
- 7 there has to be someone allowed in the execution
- 8 room, a religious minister, we want the risk to
- 9 be as close to zero as possible of something
- 10 going wrong.
- 11 Why isn't that a compelling interest
- when the State says we want the risk to be as
- 13 close to zero as possible, and, if we allow
- 14 touching and -- and the like, the risk
- 15 increases?
- 16 And you might say: Ah, there's really
- 17 still not too much of a risk, it's okay. But
- 18 the State is saying: No, we want the risk to be
- 19 low.
- How do we as a Court say, no,
- 21 actually, State, your compelling interest in
- reducing the risk to close to zero, it's not
- good enough, it's not compelling? How do we do
- 24 that?
- MR. KRETZER: Yes, Justice Kavanaugh.

- 1 My answer is somewhat different than as you
- 2 phrased it at the end of the question.
- I do not dispute at all the State's
- 4 palpable interest in having a secure
- 5 environment. Prisons are all about risk
- 6 management.
- 7 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: It's about risk.
- 8 MR. KRETZER: Yes, I understand.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: It's about degree
- 10 of risk.
- MR. KRETZER: Yes.
- 12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And we all agree
- in the security, and I appreciate your answer on
- that, but the State is saying we want the risk
- to be really close to zero of a problem.
- And you're saying you can do this and
- without a problem, and the State's saying that
- increases the risk of a problem. And I don't
- 19 think you can dispute that. It does increase
- 20 the risk of a problem some. But you can -- you
- 21 might want to respond to that.
- MR. KRETZER: My answer, Justice
- 23 Kavanaugh, would be this: I mean, risk, as a
- 24 statistical matter, is based in empirical data.
- We have a vast empirical dataset of hundreds of

- 1 executions --2 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: That --3 MR. KRETZER: -- spanning four 4 decades. 5 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I'm sorry, that 6 doesn't -- that doesn't move me at all because 7 those were state chaplains who were officials of 8 the state, which was the whole point, right? 9 That's what created the equal treatment problem 10 to begin with. Those were largely Christian, 11 right? 12 MR. KRETZER: Yes. 13 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And that created 14 the equal treatment problem. So that doesn't 15 work. 16 What they're worried about is someone 17 from the outside coming in, and you never know. 18 And it's a very fraught -- Judge Higginbotham's 19 concurrence is a very fraught situation with a
- 22 And I don't know how we, sitting here

lot of potential for issues. At least the State

23 -- we haven't -- we're not in the execution

20

21

thinks so.

- 24 room, we don't know -- how we can guestion the
- 25 State's interest in keeping the risk of a

- 1 problem close to zero.
- I think you're saying, ah, the risk
- 3 isn't that much. But how do we analyze that?
- 4 MR. KRETZER: Well, the answer,
- 5 Justice Kavanaugh, is that while I certainly
- 6 understand the State's logic, we hire the
- 7 prison-employed chaplains, ergo, we could fire
- 8 them or not renew their contract, there are
- 9 substantial laws on the books in every state
- 10 criminalizing interference with a law
- 11 enforcement officer in the disposition of his
- 12 duties.
- 13 There is not a single example in
- 14 history where any spiritual advisor -- and the
- 15 state allowed these, you know, as a matter of
- 16 course -- has ever interrupted a proceeding.
- 17 What the State can do, to answer your
- 18 question directly, Justice Kavanaugh, is exactly
- 19 that which Pastor Moore did. He went and drove
- 20 hundreds of miles to visit with these folks at a
- 21 particular location. He signed a penalty-backed
- 22 pledge.
- 23 We know the State believes that Pastor
- Moore was safe to be in the execution chamber.
- 25 On September 8, the execution leading up to when

- 1 this Court granted the stay, he sat there all
- 2 day. We know the State --
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Can I -- that's
- 4 about the facts of this case, and I understand
- 5 it, but I was asking a case -- we're going to --
- 6 you know, if we rule in your favor here, this is
- 7 going to be a heavy part of our docket for years
- 8 to come, would be my sense given the history of
- 9 death penalty litigation, which we'll -- we'll
- 10 deal with as it comes.
- 11 But, on least restrictive
- 12 alternatives, I want to ask about that. Your
- 13 basic point on that is, if another state does
- it, that helps show that there's a less
- 15 restrictive alternative.
- 16 And I quess what if a state allows, to
- 17 the -- use the Chief Justice's example, multiple
- 18 people in the room? Does that mean every state
- 19 has to do it?
- MR. KRETZER: No.
- 21 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: If the -- your
- 22 answer is no to that?
- MR. KRETZER: Okay. Yes, my answer to
- 24 that would be no. Under RLUIPA --
- 25 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. And how

- 1 about if another state allows bread and wine in
- 2 the execution room right before the execution?
- 3 Does every state have to do that because it's a
- 4 less restrictive alternative?
- 5 MR. KRETZER: No, there is not a, I
- 6 don't know, greatest common denominator or least
- 7 common denominator.
- 8 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And if -- and if
- 9 another state allows the minister to kind of hug
- 10 the inmate, does every other state have to do
- 11 that?
- MR. KRETZER: No. One state doing a
- 13 first mover does not calibrate a national
- 14 standard ipso facto.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And why -- how
- 16 could we as a Court say actually two people no,
- one person yes? Like, what neutral principle
- are we relying on there when other states do it
- 19 and we say, well, other states do it, but that's
- 20 not the least restrictive alternative?
- 21 MR. KRETZER: Justice Kavanaugh, I
- don't think there will be a micromanagement
- 23 problem. No one is asking federal courts to
- 24 micromanage.
- 25 I think the issue will remain that you

- 1 will still have most recent national standards
- 2 as demonstrated -- maybe not national
- 3 standard -- empirical basis, what we see the
- 4 federal government did just last year, and the
- 5 State of Alabama has changed its rules just in
- 6 the last six months and carried out such an
- 7 execution only two weeks ago.
- 8 And I -- perhaps I could point out the
- 9 State of Alabama actually affords more religious
- 10 exercise in that execution of Willie Smith --
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: That's --
- 12 MR. KRETZER: -- than Mr. Ramirez's
- 13 question.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- you're making
- 15 the argument that I'm -- that I'm a bit
- 16 concerned about. And you -- you make strong
- 17 arguments, so I'm not -- I'm just testing them
- 18 here.
- The argument I'm concerned about is,
- once you get one state doing this, every other
- 21 state has to follow. And then, when you get the
- 22 two -- you know, I've already -- already said
- 23 it. And you citing Alabama from two weeks ago,
- that's going to happen over and over over the
- 25 next few years, I would imagine -- maybe not --

- 1 where states are being sued by inmates in the
- 2 last days before an execution saying: Another
- 3 state does it different. I want this.
- 4 Now how do we deal with that?
- 5 MR. KRETZER: Sure. Under RLUIPA, a
- 6 state certainly can get to some point where they
- 7 have inhibitions greater than perhaps their
- 8 sister states. But, if a state wants to do
- 9 that, they would have to show evidence in the
- 10 record when the burden shift. After the
- 11 plaintiff satisfied his first prong under
- 12 RLUIPA, they would have to show that we studied
- this issue or we come to a conclusion, an
- informed conclusion, that we need to reach a
- 15 different result.
- In the Ramirez case, there was no
- 17 evidence of risk put into the record. If a
- 18 state like Texas and if this Court --
- 19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, the risk is
- inherent in having another person in the room, I
- 21 think, but you're not saying we can -- if we
- 22 rule for you in this case, the concern about
- future litigation would go away if you're saying
- there's kind of a bright line because there's a
- 25 historical practice of audible prayer and

2.2

- touching, but we're not looking for anything
 else in the execution room.
- 3 But you can't say that, can you?
- 4 MR. KRETZER: I don't know that I --
- 5 that I would agree with that, Justice Kavanaugh,
- 6 respectfully, because I think perhaps what the
- 7 State has done here is recreated, they've come
- 8 full circle, back to the same issue which
- 9 impelled the opinion in Murphy, by which I mean,
- if TDCJ chaplains, those employees, are able to
- touch and pray, and now there's a new rule the
- 12 State has so told us in -- in a seriatim fashion
- last summer that the outside non-TDCJ employees
- are not allowed to touch and pray, now you have
- 15 a new form of denominational discrimination.
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: But out -- over the
- 17 last couple of years, we have had a whole series
- of stay applications that present issues that
- 19 are related to the one that is presented here,
- 20 and each one has been different. Like virtually
- 21 every application for a stay of execution, they
- 22 come to us at the last minute, the day before,
- 23 sometimes the day of. And what you have said so
- far suggests to me that we can look forward to
- an unending stream of variations.

1 So you would be satisfied -- you have told us you would be satisfied if Pastor Moore 2 3 touches Mr. Ramirez's foot. But what's going to happen when the next prisoner says that I have a 4 religious belief that he should touch my knee? 5 6 He should hold my hand? He should put his hand 7 over my heart? He should be able to put his hand on my head? We're going to have to go 8 through the whole human anatomy with a series of 9 -- of cases. 10 11 And you haven't said anything about 12 what you want exactly with respect to audible 13 prayer. What type of prayer? When? How loud? 14 What exactly do you want to start out with? 15 MR. KRETZER: Yes, let me touch --16 Justice Alito, start with audible prayer. Yes, 17 prayer, as we -- should be non-disruptive, 18 audible prayer in the ordinary style of how 19 people pray. 20 When, to answer your question directly, Justice Alito, is after the in -- the 21 2.2 -- the pastor and the warden come in together 23 after the drug team has already inserted the IV line. So --24 25 JUSTICE ALITO: And you want it

- 1 throughout the execution? You want it up to the
- 2 point where the prisoner loses consciousness or
- 3 dies?
- 4 MR. KRETZER: Yes. The pastor can
- 5 step away. What they agreed to do in Alabama is
- 6 before -- after the prisoner passes, when the
- 7 conscious -- the pastor steps away when the
- 8 unconsciousness assessment is performed and then
- 9 remains when the drapes are closed and removal
- 10 and so forth.
- 11 So the prayer, to answer your
- 12 question, Justice Alito, yes, would be after the
- 13 -- the lethal injection begins and then until --
- JUSTICE ALITO: Okay. Well, that's --
- MR. KRETZER: -- the point in time he
- 16 passes in a non-disruptive way.
- 17 JUSTICE ALITO: -- that's helpful.
- 18 So can you -- can you say anything to
- 19 us to relieve us of the fear that we are going
- 20 to get an unending stream of variations about
- 21 both of these things, about touching different
- 22 parts of the body, about the type of prayer, the
- 23 -- the singing, chanting, number of people in
- 24 the room? Are we just -- is this just what's
- 25 going to happen?

1 The lower courts are going to have to deal with this on the eve of every execution, 2 3 and we're going to get these at the very last 4 minute and have to decide them. The difference between the -- the factual information presented 5 to us in these briefs and what we received in 6 7 all of the previous stay applications is like 8 night and day. MR. KRETZER: Well, Justice Alito, I 9 could talk about timing, and then I'll switch in 10 11 just a second. 12 With regard to timing, in Mr. Ramirez's case, the 1983 petition was filed a 13 14 month in advance of the execution date, and the 15 district judge entered a scheduling order when 16 the motion for stay would be filed, the 17 response/reply. So all those proceeded very 18 much apace, and the Fifth Circuit ruled within a 19 few days. So everything proceeded here on a listed schedule. 20 21 When we go --JUSTICE ALITO: Well, how far in 2.2 advance of the execution did it come here? 23 MR. KRETZER: The Fifth Circuit, I 24 25 believe their opinion issued on Labor Day. The

- 1 Court was obviously -- early that morning. I
- 2 wrote the stay application the following day.
- 3 The next day, the State responded, and I
- 4 followed the reply that same day. So it all --
- 5 JUSTICE ALITO: And when was the --
- 6 how far in advance of the execution day was
- 7 that?
- 8 MR. KRETZER: I believe the execution
- 9 date's a Tuesday, the -- the 8th was a Tuesday
- 10 -- I don't have a calendar in front of me -- but
- I believe that was correct. So I filed -- no,
- 12 it was the 7th. So I -- the Fifth Circuit
- opinion issued on the 6th, the stay application
- was filed on the 7th, the State responded in the
- middle of the day of the 8th, and the reply was
- 16 filed later that same day.
- 17 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, we get these at
- 18 the very last minute, and we're going to
- 19 continue to get them at the very last minute.
- MR. KRETZER: Well, I don't know that
- 21 -- Justice Alito, that you necessarily -- I -- I
- don't know that you necessarily will get them at
- 23 the last minute. I think it has to be
- 24 remembered that Mr. Ramirez, starting back when
- 25 his execution was first scheduled, started to

- 1 file Step 1, Step 2 grievances. Then the State
- 2 changed their policy. The State then proceeded
- 3 to list these restrictions in seriatim in this
- 4 piecemeal fashion that came from a letter from
- 5 the general counsel and so forth.
- If the State is so worried about these
- 7 things coming up in the last minute, all they
- 8 have to do is actually tell us what the rules
- 9 are. In other words, there's not a single thing
- in the prison manual that anyone can see or in
- 11 the form that Pastor Moore was told to sign that
- 12 says what he could or could not do. If the
- 13 State would simply tell us what they want
- instead of having -- make us try to figure out
- 15 by guessing, these would not --
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: All right. Well, we
- 17 can --
- MR. KRETZER: -- present so late.
- 19 JUSTICE ALITO: -- you know, you and
- 20 -- and -- and Texas can argue about who did what
- 21 when and all of that, and it's relevant to some
- 22 of the issues.
- But, to get back to my point about the
- 24 unending stream of variations, I -- I take it
- 25 what you said is, well, each one of these is

- 1 different, factually different; prisoners have
- different religious beliefs; each one has to be
- 3 analyzed separately.
- 4 MR. KRETZER: Well --
- 6 different execution chambers, different sizes,
- 7 different religious beliefs, each one will
- 8 present its own unique question.
- 9 MR. KRETZER: Justice Alito, I'm sorry
- 10 --
- JUSTICE ALITO: Maybe that's the way
- 12 it has to be.
- MR. KRETZER: Justice Alito, I mean,
- 14 I'm certainly no expert on religion. I don't
- 15 know all the religions in the world, but I think
- 16 similar concerns voiced in this Court in the
- 17 early Religious Freedom Restoration Act cases,
- in the Church of Lukumi and so forth, no -- even
- 19 in the Holt v. Hobbs case, the question was
- 20 specifically asked: Are these issues going to
- bubble up one half-an-inch beard at a time?
- They're not going to present in that
- 23 order. I don't think any religion has striated
- that there must be a touch on this particular
- 25 piece of the body. What we're talking about

- 1 here is a laying-on-of-hands doctrine that the
- 2 minister does with all of his congregants as
- 3 they're nearing the point in time that they die.
- 4 If some other inmate has a
- 5 well-established, sincerely held belief and that
- 6 can be -- bear their burden under RLUIPA on the
- 7 first prong, then perhaps that will be or it
- 8 will not be their --
- 9 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, do you think in
- 10 -- in RLUIPA a court can say you are whatever,
- 11 you are a -- a Catholic, and so I am going to
- see what the teaching of the Catholic Church is
- on this question? Is that the way this is --
- 14 this is resolved? Or --
- MR. KRETZER: No.
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: -- can the prisoner
- say, well, yes, I'm a Catholic, but I have my
- own personal beliefs about this? Would we not
- 19 have to honor that person's own sincere,
- 20 individual, perhaps unique religious beliefs?
- 21 Isn't that the way RLUIPA works?
- MR. KRETZER: To answer your question,
- the first part of your question, Justice Alito,
- 24 no, what you said is exactly opposite to RLUIPA.
- No, you cannot inquire as to the centrality or

	dicinate correctness theorogically of a
2	JUSTICE ALITO: Right.
3	MR. KRETZER: sincerely held
4	religious belief. I think the point was made in
5	the Tenth Circuit in Yellowbear that the
6	question for federal district courts in that
7	first prong of RLUIPA is really just, is the
8	inmate trying to perpetrate a fraud on the
9	court? Are they lying to try to get some
10	benefit they would otherwise not be entitled to
11	in the secular context?
12	Once they do that, the burden shifts
13	to the state. RLUIPA is written this way. And
14	all the equities, the victims and so forth, were
15	all taken into account and cognized by Congress
16	in the statute passed nearly unanimously over 20
17	years ago.
18	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
19	counsel.
20	Justice Thomas, anything further?
21	JUSTICE THOMAS: No, Chief.
22	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
23	Breyer?
24	Justice Alito? No?
25	Justice Sotomayor?

1	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Counsel, under the
2	Turner standard, a generalized security interest
3	would have been enough to defeat a claim.
4	RLUIPA changed that, and whether we like it or
5	not, it requires the state to address each
6	individual person's need. And a risk analysis
7	that talks generally about a compelling need is
8	not not the standard that RLUIPA sets. The
9	standard is, is something that you're proposing
LO	going to interfere with this execution?
L1	Now I looked at the pictures that I
L2	was provided, and the other side gave a bunch of
L3	reasons. They said it'll block the view. But I
L4	saw the picture of the prison, and the window at
L5	least by the foot doesn't block the view. So
L6	where you want to stand is not going to block
L7	the view.
L8	They have fears that a unknown pastor
L9	could and this goes to Justice Kavanaugh's
20	concern that an unknown pastor could go to
21	the IV line, could go to the manacles, et
22	cetera. But the manacles are nowhere near
23	there. The minister has a person standing with
24	him.
25	I'm agguming that your argument is

- 1 that every security risk they present is just
- 2 not presented by these facts, correct?
- 3 MR. KRETZER: Correct, yes.
- 4 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And going back to
- 5 the response that Justice Kavanaugh and Justice
- 6 Alito have expressed, it's not us that have to
- 7 worry about the individualized treatment.
- 8 Congress has told us that that's what
- 9 petitioners are entitled to, correct?
- 10 MR. KRETZER: Yes.
- 11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And prisons have
- 12 to work in good faith to accommodate those
- 13 needs?
- MR. KRETZER: They're supposed to,
- 15 yes.
- 16 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They waited a
- 17 month to tell you -- six weeks to tell you they
- 18 wouldn't permit the touching or praying. That's
- 19 not working in good faith is what you're saying?
- 20 MR. KRETZER: I never heard, Justice
- 21 Sotomayor, a word about no prayer until I got
- that letter on August 19.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. So
- they can say what it is early and tell people,
- if you have an objection, come in and tell us

	what you heed within a tertain amount of time,
2	correct?
3	MR. KRETZER: Yes.
4	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That's what you've
5	said?
6	MR. KRETZER: Yes.
7	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So they can avoid
8	last-minute requests by simply setting
9	reasonable guidelines, correct?
10	MR. KRETZER: They could, yes.
11	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And acting
12	expeditiously?
13	MR. KRETZER: Yes.
14	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They're the ones
15	who waited close to the execution date, correct?
16	MR. KRETZER: Yes, Justice
17	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That's your point?
18	MR. KRETZER: Yes.
19	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. Thank
20	you, counsel.
21	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice Kagan?
22	Justice Gorsuch, anything further?
23	Justice Kavanaugh?
24	JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I do have several
25	questions. Judge Higginbotham said in his

- 1 concurring opinion: "While lethal injection may
- 2 seem straightforward, the actual administration
- 3 of the drugs and pronouncement of death is both
- 4 delicate and fraught with difficulties, as
- 5 evidenced by the responses of regulatory bodies
- 6 and the experience of this Court with mishaps in
- 7 execution by lethal injection.
- 8 "In short, the complexities attending
- 9 the administration of drugs in the execution
- 10 procedure and its failures expose the risks of
- 11 non-medical hands on the body of a person
- 12 undergoing the procedure."
- Why do you think Judge Higginbotham's
- 14 wrong?
- MR. KRETZER: Well, it's not that I
- 16 think he's wrong, Justice Kavanaugh. These --
- 17 Pastor Moore is definitionally not a doctor.
- 18 His hands would be on the body. So, in that
- 19 sense, his -- you know, it would be non-medical
- 20 hands on the body.
- 21 The way Judge Higginbotham construed
- 22 it, though, was no hands means no hands. It's a
- 23 direct quote, I believe, from his opinion. And
- 24 yet, we know that that would not be true under
- 25 the State's own logic with a TDCJ chaplain who

- 1 has touched the -- I believe there's testimony
- 2 that he touched the leg, the calf, so forth, for
- 3 years.
- 4 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And that goes to
- 5 the risk question that I talked about earlier
- 6 because that person has been an employee.
- 7 But second question. On sincerity, to
- 8 follow up on Justice Alito's questions, this is
- 9 a potential huge area of future litigation
- 10 across a lot of areas, sincerity of religious
- 11 claims, and how do we -- how do we question
- 12 those?
- Some things that people have talked
- about are the incentives someone might have to
- 15 be insincere, behavioral inconsistencies --
- 16 Justice Thomas's questions got at that with the
- 17 complaint -- the religious tradition of the
- 18 practice.
- 19 Are those -- what do we look at to
- 20 check sincerity? Because that's a very awkward
- 21 thing for a judge to do to say: I want to look
- into the sincerity of your claim, but our case
- law says we must do that.
- MR. KRETZER: Well, Justice --
- 25 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: How do we do that?

- 1 MR. KRETZER: Yes, Justice Kavanaugh.
- 2 I would argue, yes, while federal judges, you
- 3 know, obviously would be very worried to look at
- 4 the religiosity, the correctness of the
- 5 religious aspects of the claim, federal district
- 6 courts judge sincerity, in a manner of speaking,
- 7 all the time. Credibility determinations are
- 8 made by district judges in every motion to
- 9 suppress.
- 10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: It's a -- it's a
- 11 little more awkward, I think you would admit,
- for a judge to tell someone you're claiming that
- 13 you believe this is a matter of religion, but I
- think you're lying. That's -- that's hard to
- do. Do you agree with that?
- MR. KRETZER: Well, I don't know that
- 17 I do, Justice Kavanaugh. I mean, district
- judges have to, unfortunately, say they believe
- in a suppression hearing, for example, a case
- 20 agent or any other manner of law enforcement
- 21 witness is not telling the truth.
- 22 Many experts testify in white collar
- 23 cases on causality. Expert people have to
- 24 testify about things all the time in a district
- court on a Daubert challenge, for example, and

- 1 has to decide whether or not it's sincere.
- 2 Maybe not sincere as to religious
- 3 beliefs to be sure. It might be a somewhat more
- 4 rare circumstance. But those sort of
- 5 credibility determinations are made on a daily
- 6 basis in federal courts in this country.
- 7 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. Two more.
- 8 Sorry, I'll try to be succinct.
- 9 Justice Sotomayor is quite right in
- saying that Congress put this standard in place,
- 11 the strict scrutiny standard. I think the
- difficulty of applying it's one of the reasons
- 13 some of us in -- in Fulton had concerns about
- 14 what might replace Smith.
- 15 And this case is a good illustration,
- 16 I think, of the problems that can arise trying
- to apply a strict scrutiny standard. But just
- on the relationship of compelling interests
- 19 versus least restrictive alternative, and when
- 20 it goes to risk, I mean, I'm still having
- 21 problems with they're saying we should keep the
- 22 risk to zero, and you're saying, no, you should
- 23 tolerate a little more risk because Alabama does
- 24 it.
- MR. KRETZER: No, just --

1 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And -- and -- or 2 because other states do it. And I just, as a 3 judge, don't know. You might be right. They 4 might be right. I don't know of a neutral principle, how to -- how to resolve that where 5 6 they're saying we want the risk lower, we want 7 the risk to be lower than our next-door -- or the state -- state -- another state. 8 9 MR. KRETZER: Justice Kavanaugh, I 10 think I'd have to very respectfully disagree 11 with the premise of that last part of the 12 question, which is that a non-TDCJ employee chaplain necessarily carries with him some 13 14 appreciable additional level of risk. 15 I can say I attach --16 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. Can I stop 17 you right there? I don't see how you can say 18 that. 19 MR. KRETZER: Okay. 20 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: There's another human being, to go back to Judge Higginbotham, 21 in the execution room in about the most fraught 2.2 23 situation anyone can imagine, especially if the person is, by definition, close to the inmate, 24 25 spiritually, friends, and they're about to die

- 1 and be put to death.
- 2 And the idea that we can predict how
- another human being will react in that situation
- 4 and be sure, as you're saying, that the person's
- 5 not going to react in a way that they would
- 6 never react in any other situation, I just don't
- 7 -- I don't know. You might be right, and -- and
- 8 we'll see, I guess, if -- if you prevail here,
- 9 how -- how this plays out.
- 10 But I'm -- it's not my decision, and
- 11 as a judge, I don't know how I prioritize your
- 12 assessment of that over the State's.
- MR. KRETZER: Well, the way I can say
- that, to answer your question, Justice
- 15 Kavanaugh, you asked me how I can say that.
- The way I can say that is that it is
- incredibly well documented, every single time
- anyone, a minister, a reporter, or anybody else
- 19 goes to see a prisoner, Pastor Moore has been
- 20 going to see, for example, Mr. Ramirez for five
- 21 years, longer than I've been his lawyer --
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I'm not
- 23 questioning --
- 24 MR. KRETZER: -- there's never been an
- 25 incident.

Τ	JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I'M SOTTY to
2	interrupt. I'm not questioning the current
3	pastor at all involved in this case, so I don't
4	mean to do that.
5	And the last question, I'll finish
6	with this, is just the victims. I mean, we
7	haven't mentioned we've gone a long time and
8	we haven't mentioned the victim's family, who
9	filed a brief here, and they've had to go
LO	through now four-and-a-half years of postponed
L1	executions.
L2	And their brief says: "In Maria's
L3	eyes, Ramirez gets all this publicity like he
L4	just won a gold medal, while she and her family
L5	are going through all this pain and suffering
L6	each time they're told Ramirez will be executed,
L7	only to have the courts put a hold on it."
L8	You know, we we have to think about
L9	the the victim's family members too with
20	this, oh, it's going to be a stay here and a
21	stay there and a stay there and each time
22	they're they're they're brought to the
23	execution room decades after the the crime,
24	where their father was, you know, beaten to
25	death and stabbed to death in a parking lot

1	I mean, I just think we that's all
2	by way of saying that as a legal point to it, if
3	we're going to rule for you, I think we need
4	some clear lines so, as Justice Alito says,
5	we're not putting future victims' families in
6	the same position of time after time having
7	these delays.
8	MR. KRETZER: Justice Kavanaugh, I
9	have nothing but the greatest sympathy for the
10	family of Pablo Castro. I grieve for them. I
11	feel horribly for their loss.
12	Victims certainly do have an interest
13	in public interest in the proceedings and
14	finality of executions of judgment and so forth.
15	All those victims' interests were specifically
16	taken into account by Congress when it passed
17	the RLUIPA.
18	And that was not even a newfangled
19	concept 20 years ago some now when the RLUIPA
20	was passed. The brief the amicus of the Becket
21	Fund filed where they showed the historical
22	examples of where pastoral or spiritual guidance
23	has been given throughout history to people as
24	risible as the Nazis, and the point was made it
25	was not a luxury afforded for who those people

- 1 were but something that religion affords in
- 2 larger society because of who the society is.
- 3 And Congress accounted for all of that
- 4 when it passed the statute, and that's how the
- 5 equities are to be balanced out.
- 6 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Thank you. I
- 7 appreciate your good answers. Thank you.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
- 9 Barrett?
- 10 JUSTICE BARRETT: I just have one
- 11 question. So Justice Kavanaugh has been asking
- 12 you about how strict scrutiny would apply here,
- and Justice Kavanaugh said that the compelling
- 14 interest that the State has is in the reduction
- of risk because, understandably, the State wants
- 16 that risk to be zero because the consequences of
- 17 a botched execution are quite high.
- I think how we define the compelling
- 19 interest matters a lot for how the strict
- 20 scrutiny analysis plays out. So I'm just
- 21 wondering how you would characterize the State's
- 22 interests. Would you characterize it the way
- that Justice Kavanaugh does, or do you have a
- 24 different articulation of how you think the
- 25 compelling interest should be described?

Т	MR. KRETZER: I THINK I WOULD
2	characterize it, respectfully, slightly
3	differently than Justice Kavanaugh did, Justice
4	Barrett, and that is that the compelling
5	interest is in a execution that is done in the
6	humane way, in the safe way, for all the
7	circumstances that have been discussed here and
8	further in the briefs.
9	If the State, though, is going to
10	the compelling interest, to answer your question
11	directly, is directed towards how they have
12	chose to frame the execution, the for
13	instance, the size of the execution chamber.
14	The prison chose the size of that execution
15	chamber. Under RLUIPA, a prison entity can be
16	required to spend
17	JUSTICE BARRETT: Well, that's not
18	MR. KRETZER: some money to
19	alleviate
20	JUSTICE BARRETT: the compelling
21	interest, right? That that goes to how the
22	State is structuring the execution and how it
23	chooses to carry it out.
24	I mean, the compelling interest may be
25	prison security or, you know, as you say, the

- 1 humanity -- carrying -- carrying out the
- 2 execution in a humane and safe way. But the
- 3 size of the execution chamber, I don't think, is
- 4 the compelling interest, right?
- 5 MR. KRETZER: No, I would agree. The
- 6 compelling interest is in the safety of -- I
- 7 mean, that's what prisons do. They're risk
- 8 management operations.
- 9 I guess one could construct a
- 10 perfectly safe operation where no one --
- 11 lawyers, reporters, anybody -- was ever allowed
- 12 to see an inmate. Prisons are tasked with
- 13 managing risk. One has to show the ID and a
- 14 background check and paperwork and so forth,
- which the State is free to and did and is doing,
- of any pastor who wants to come in for these
- 17 circumstances.
- So, yes, the State absolutely has a
- 19 compelling interest. I embrace it completely.
- 20 And yet, that compelling interest, if they're
- 21 going to then go to the next step, the State,
- it's not that they could not necessarily do
- 23 something different than other states or the
- 24 federal government is doing, but --
- JUSTICE BARRETT: But you're talking

- 1 about least restrictive alternatives.
- 2 MR. KRETZER: Okay.
- JUSTICE BARRETT: I just wanted to
- 4 know --
- 5 MR. KRETZER: Okay, yes.
- 6 JUSTICE BARRETT: -- about compelling
- 7 interests. You answered the question. Thank
- 8 you very much.
- 9 MR. KRETZER: Yes.
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
- 11 counsel.
- 12 Mr. Feigin.
- ORAL ARGUMENT OF ERIC J. FEIGIN FOR
- 14 THE UNITED STATES, AS AMICUS CURIAE
- MR. FEIGIN: Thank you, Mr. Chief
- 16 Justice, and may it please the Court:
- 17 As the submissions to this Court,
- including today, reflect, there are continuing
- 19 factual disputes on many issues that we think
- 20 ultimately warrant a remand. And we'd like to
- 21 think that better explaining the federal
- 22 experience may be helpful for further review.
- We agree that Texas can vindicate its
- 24 compelling interests by substantially limiting
- 25 physical contact with the inmate and

- 1 vocalization by a spiritual advisor in the
- 2 highly choreographed and sensitive execution
- 3 procedure.
- 4 But our recent experiences suggest
- 5 that a categorical ban, like Texas appears to
- 6 have, isn't the least restrictive means for
- 7 doing so. To justify such a ban, Texas would
- 8 have to offer -- its experts would have to offer
- 9 state-specific reasons why it's necessary.
- 10 I -- I'm happy to take the Court's
- 11 questions, but one way in which I might be a
- 12 little helpful is just to tease apart the word
- 13 "execution," which I think is just used as an
- overarching term in both some of the briefing
- and in -- especially in media reports.
- There are really two relevant phases
- 17 that occur when both the inmate and his
- 18 spiritual advisor are in the execution chamber
- 19 together, separated by before the drugs are
- 20 administered and during the administration of
- 21 the drugs. And, obviously, the second part,
- 22 which, in our experience, takes about five to
- eight minutes, is the more sensitive portion of
- the procedure.
- So we do think it's helpful to think

- 1 about this case in terms of maybe a little bit
- 2 like a box. He's making two claims, one for
- 3 physical contact, one for vocalization. And
- 4 there are two parts, as relevant here, of the
- 5 procedure, one before the drug and one during
- 6 the drug.
- 7 We think Texas has a very strong
- 8 argument to resist physical contact during the
- 9 administration of the drug, and we have not
- 10 allowed that.
- 11 We think, conversely, that Petitioner
- 12 has a fairly strong argument that -- for
- 13 vocalization before the administration of the
- 14 drug. In fact, if you look at page 16a,
- paragraph 11 of the Lumpkin declaration, I don't
- 16 think they even really address why they couldn't
- 17 accommodate that.
- 18 And then the other two boxes,
- 19 vocalization during the administration of the
- 20 drug -- and I can talk a little bit more about
- 21 that later -- and physical contact before
- 22 administration of the drug are a little bit more
- indeterminate and could benefit from some
- 24 further factual findings.
- I apologize, Justice Thomas. You

- 1 appeared to want to ask a question.
- JUSTICE THOMAS: Well, I think you're
- 3 -- you've come close to answering it because I'm
- 4 interested in what would be precisely in this
- 5 context the State of Texas -- I know you've
- 6 generically talked about it -- what would be the
- 7 least restrictive means in this case?
- 8 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, I can't
- 9 answer that question definitively, in part
- 10 because I -- I really do think it depends on
- 11 some factual circumstances that I don't know and
- 12 certainly aren't in the record.
- I can share what the federal
- 14 experience has revealed. We have -- although it
- isn't the way we would have necessarily ideally
- 16 set up the procedure, we've allowed vocalization
- 17 essentially throughout. Obviously, someone
- 18 can't interrupt the marshal while they're
- 19 announcing the judgment or when something --
- 20 someone else is speaking. But we've allowed
- vocalization essentially throughout, through
- 22 both phases of the execution. And we've allowed
- 23 physical contact one time briefly before the
- 24 execution -- before the administration of the
- 25 drugs began.

1 In every instance where we've had a 2 spiritual advisor in the chamber, the spiritual 3 advisor has been well away from the inmate as the drugs are actually administered. 4 JUSTICE THOMAS: So do you -- and the 5 6 next claim would be, you know, obviously, a 7 little more contact. But I want to ask you something that's different, okay? 8 9 So we have RFRA and we have RLUIPA, and the -- we normally, in -- under RFRA, would 10 11 rarely discuss the sincerity of beliefs. 12 Is that analysis different under RLUIPA, considering the opportunities for gaming 13 14 the system? 15 MR. FEIGIN: I -- I think sincerity is 16 quite relevant under, frankly, both statutes, 17 Justice Thomas, but I think you're quite right 18 that in the RLUIPA context, there may be 19 particularized incentives for someone to falsely 20 claim a religious belief. 21 And some of those concerns are 2.2 manifest here and would need to be developed a 23 little bit further. Obviously, it raises one 24 red flag that something different was claimed in 25 the 2020 litigation, and now we have the State's

- lodging -- and that's what I was also citing
- 2 earlier, the State's lodging -- and at page 25a
- of the redacted declaration, you can see the
- 4 representation is made that on the day he
- 5 thought he was going to be executed, the only
- 6 reason he wanted to meet with Pastor Moore was,
- 7 he represented, because of the pending
- 8 litigation, which raises further sincerity
- 9 concerns.
- 10 We took sincerity as a given here
- 11 because the lower courts did. They, as we
- 12 understand it, essentially just considered the
- 13 narrow tailoring analysis and almost nothing
- 14 else past that.
- JUSTICE THOMAS: Thank you.
- 16 MR. FEIGIN: But we do think that's a
- 17 -- an issue here.
- JUSTICE THOMAS: Thank you.
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Mr. Feigin, what
- is insincere about -- there's steps to this.
- 21 There's a certain amount of time in which an
- inmate is given with his family, correct, and,
- 23 presumably, with a pastor if he wants it before
- the execution, correct?
- MR. FEIGIN: Yes, Your Honor.

1 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And, here, he 2 decided not to have the pastor there, correct? MR. FEIGIN: I -- I believe his -- if 3 I'm understanding the declaration correctly, 4 Your Honor, I believe his pastor was there, but 5 6 he chose not to meet with him. 7 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: He wanted to meet with his family. How does that take away from 8 9 his desire to have the pastor at -- in the 10 execution chamber when he's dying? Because the 11 whole purpose of the religious belief is that 12 you should have a pastor to help guide you to 13 the other place. 14 MR. FEIGIN: So, Your Honor, I am not 15 suggesting how a court should come out if it 16 considered these facts. I am simply suggesting 17 that given the combination of facts -- and, in fact, Petitioner, in the reply brief, said he 18 19 would welcome a hearing at which he can have a 20 chance to explain or maybe even --21 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Do you have any --2.2 MR. FEIGIN: -- cross-examine these --23 these facts. 24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- do you have any 25 reason why we shouldn't order -- enter an order

- 1 like we did in Murphy, which is send it back,
- let these issues be threshed out, but let Texas
- 3 decide whether it wants to execute him in the
- 4 meantime? Because it does seem as though
- 5 sending it back would cause delay, but it's
- 6 within Texas's freedom to choose to accommodate
- 7 him and go ahead, correct?
- 8 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, I
- 9 think, essentially, we -- we don't disagree that
- 10 the Court should simply remand. I'd add that
- there's been no dispute with the representation
- 12 in our brief, so I take it to be correct under
- 13 Texas law, though I'm no expert in it, that --
- pages 32 and 33 of our brief, that under Texas
- law, there'd have to be a 90-day waiting period
- 16 between a court setting a new execution date and
- 17 the actual execution, which means there would be
- 18 at least 90 days to develop a further record on
- 19 some of these issues.
- 20 And also, regardless of whether there
- 21 was proper exhaustion here or whether the
- 22 absence of exhaustion could be excused as
- 23 unavailable, I do think there are some
- 24 continuing factual matters that the parties
- 25 might be able to work out between themselves as

- 1 far as the -- exactly what Petitioner is
- 2 requesting and exactly what he would be
- 3 satisfied with and how far the State can go to
- 4 accommodate that.
- 5 That's exactly why exhaustion is so
- 6 important, because it not only allows for some
- 7 consensual resolution but might really
- 8 crystallize the dispute into a dispute of a much
- 9 smaller nature; either we're just talking about
- one of the boxes I mentioned earlier or maybe
- 11 even just a --
- 12 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That seems --
- MR. FEIGIN: -- subcomponent of one.
- 14 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- useless here
- 15 because they didn't give a response for six
- 16 weeks.
- 17 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They never
- 19 attempted to engage in accommodation.
- 20 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, I think
- 21 that goes to whether the grievance process was
- 22 properly exhausted and whether they were on
- 23 notice that there was specific requests for
- 24 vocalization and at what point Petitioner was
- 25 aware that that would be limited, which are also

- 1 factual issues that could be explored.
- 2 But -- and perhaps I am being overly
- 3 optimistic about the degree of accommodation
- 4 that could be reached between the parties, but I
- 5 do think that further development during at
- 6 least that 90-day period and possibly longer --
- 7 as you noted, it's obviously under Texas's
- 8 control when it decides to set the execution
- 9 date and carry out the execution -- some further
- 10 degree of development in the lower courts would
- 11 be tremendously helpful, not only so the courts
- can properly resolve this but also for purposes
- of the parties themselves.
- 14 JUSTICE KAGAN: Mr. Feigin --
- 15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Mr. Feigin --
- 16 go ahead.
- I don't understand how the prison
- officials and the judges are supposed to assess
- 19 sincerity. I mean, it is certainly
- 20 understandable that as death approaches, inmates
- 21 may have, you know, different religious views
- 22 than they did before and -- and want to take
- 23 those into account.
- I mean, let's say a week before a
- 25 prisoner comes in and -- and says: I want to

- 1 become a member of a particular church because I
- 2 think I -- you know, I need that to be saved.
- And the period, the -- the training,
- 4 the whatever, the initiation is three months,
- 5 and it's very sincere.
- 6 What -- what happens then?
- 7 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, if a
- 8 court believes it's very sincere, I'm not --
- 9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We have -- we
- 10 have no reason to doubt the sincerity.
- 11 MR. FEIGIN: Well, I -- I think that's
- 12 somewhat how the lower courts took this case. I
- 13 think it is difficult to determine sincerity.
- 14 It's nevertheless a requirement that the statute
- 15 --
- 16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Even if --
- 17 MR. FEIGIN: -- imposes --
- 18 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: -- he says,
- 19 you know, the process for me to reach the point
- 20 under which I feel that I can -- you know, the
- 21 religion would benefit me is three months?
- MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, I think
- 23 there are -- if I could take this out a little
- 24 bit and just talk about the universe of
- 25 religious claims for a second, this is a

- 1 particularly, for reasons you just mentioned,
- 2 difficult subset of that.
- But, just generally, I think it is a
- 4 very robust requirement that courts have been
- 5 able to use to eliminate certain frivolous
- 6 claims, like my religion requires me to be a
- 7 marijuana distributor or something to that
- 8 effect.
- 9 I think it gets somewhat more
- 10 difficult, Your Honor, in -- in this context,
- 11 and I -- it might well require something like an
- 12 evidentiary hearing here.
- 13 And I think what makes -- I think
- 14 there will be cases in which sincerity has
- 15 certain red flags on it, and I think this case
- 16 may or may not be one of those, but in a case
- 17 where it does appear that the inmate has a
- 18 sincere religious belief, the court would have
- 19 to proceed to the further steps.
- Now there --
- 21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you.
- 22 Justice Kagan?
- JUSTICE KAGAN: May I ask more about
- the BOP experience? I mean, as I understand it,
- 25 there were 13 recent executions. In 11, there

- 1 were spiritual advisors there. You said that
- 2 all of them, you allowed vocalization throughout
- 3 the process, but in only one was there touching
- 4 and that before the drugs were administered.
- 5 Is that basically -- did I get that
- 6 right?
- 7 MR. FEIGIN: Yes, Your Honor, with --
- 8 with two very small caveats. It's a little bit
- 9 unclear, just because no one was focusing on
- 10 this when they made their records, it's a little
- 11 bit unclear whether all the vocalization
- included vocalization during the administration
- of the drugs. It may have; it may not have.
- And, also, I think, in one case, it
- was just conversation before and not actual
- 16 prayer.
- 17 JUSTICE KAGAN: Here's what I'd like
- 18 to know. I guess I'd like to get a little more
- 19 texture about how the process played out.
- In other words, you know, when you got
- 21 these requests, what -- what -- you being the
- 22 BOP, what did -- what did the BOP do? Were
- 23 there discussions? Were there requests that
- 24 were rejected? Were -- were -- how does this
- 25 all get managed in -- in -- in the experience of

1 the BOP? 2 As I understand it, none of these ever 3 came to a court. Is that -- is that right? I 4 mean --5 MR. FEIGIN: That's --6 JUSTICE KAGAN: -- they all came to a 7 court, but not with respect to the religious claims. 8 9 MR. FEIGIN: That's correct, Your Honor. There were some RFRA claims with the 10 recent executions, but they didn't relate to 11 12 this specific issue. JUSTICE KAGAN: So how does this all 13 14 get done? 15 MR. FEIGIN: Essentially, Your Honor, we resolve them informally. We have discussions 16 17 with the inmates and/or their spiritual advisor 18 about what it was that they were proposing and 19 internal discussions about what could be accommodated. I don't think we accommodated 20 21 every single request --

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JUSTICE KAGAN: What kind of --

MR. FEIGIN: -- that was made.

JUSTICE KAGAN: -- requests did you

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24

25

reject?

1 MR. FEIGIN: Your Honor, I -- I'm not 2 aware of any specific requests that we rejected, 3 but my general understanding is there may have 4 been requests that we did not -- I -- I don't want to rep -- my -- my concern is representing 5 6 to the Court that we accommodated everything 7 that was requested of us. I'm not certain I 8 could make that representation. But everyone 9 was clearly satisfied enough that we avoided last-minute litigation. 10 11 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: But there was no 12 -- no touching, right? 13 MR. FEIGIN: There was no touching 14 during --15 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: So, if someone had 16 requested touching, like Petitioner --17 JUSTICE KAGAN: But there was touching 18 in one, is that -- is that correct? 19 MR. FEIGIN: There was -- may I, Your 20 Honor? 21 JUSTICE KAGAN: It was -- wasn't there 22 communion given in one and the -- and use of 23 holy oils? MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, our --24

our recollection of that one is a little bit

- different from -- from Father O'Keefe's
- 2 recollection of it, but there was -- our
- 3 recollection is there was at least some
- 4 touching, but that was during the period before
- 5 the administration of the drugs.
- 6 And we don't think it was communion in
- 7 the sense of giving someone a wafer on the
- 8 tongue or anything to that effect.
- 9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
- 10 counsel.
- 11 Justice Thomas?
- 12 JUSTICE THOMAS: No.
- 13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
- 14 Breyer?
- 15 Justice Alito?
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: Yeah, Mr. Feigin, I do
- 17 have a number of questions. RLUIPA, like RFRA,
- 18 like the pre-Smith free exercise jurisprudence
- 19 of this Court, requires an individualized
- 20 determination. That's been the law for a long
- 21 time. RFRA's been on the books for a long time.
- 22 It's a completely workable standard. It's
- 23 regrettable it wasn't extended to the Free
- 24 Exercise Clause, but it is individualized.
- 25 And what would be most helpful here, I

- 1 think, is if we could at least identify sort of
- 2 a gold standard, not to preclude individualized
- 3 variations but a -- a -- something that will
- 4 generally be sufficient to take into account
- 5 religious demands regarding the two things that
- 6 are at issue here, touching and vocalization,
- 7 and accommodation of the State's interests.
- And we could look to the BOP, doesn't
- 9 get to specify what the First Amendment requires
- or what RLUIPA requires, but it's a starting
- 11 point. And so, if you -- you -- you've said
- 12 what has happened in the past. If there are
- 13 federal executions in the future, what will the
- 14 BOP do?
- 15 Will it -- will its policy be
- 16 generally -- will its policy be no touching
- during the execution, vocalization allowed
- 18 throughout the -- the -- the execution so long
- 19 as it doesn't interfere with other
- 20 communications that have to take place?
- 21 MR. FEIGIN: Your Honor, I -- I don't
- 22 think -- I can't quite represent accurately
- 23 under any circumstances exactly what BOP --
- 24 JUSTICE ALITO: All right. Let me --
- 25 that --

1 MR. FEIGIN: -- would do in a specific 2 case. 3 JUSTICE ALITO: -- that's unfair, an unfair question, so let me -- let me look back. 4 That was what BOP apparently thought 5 6 was appropriate during the executions that took 7 place last year? MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, I want 8 to be a little bit more nuanced about that. 9 think what the BOP was doing was making 10 11 individualized judgments about each particular 12 case and then were kind of mapping out a -- how that shaped out if you look at the entire 13 universe of the 13. 14 15 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, I wonder if you 16 could be a little more helpful. What does the 17 BOP regard as sufficient to satisfy its interests in security and in having executions 18 19 carried out without any interference? 20 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, if we 21 wanted to have the risk be absolutely zero, 22 there would be no spiritual advisor in the 23 chamber whatsoever. 24 However, BOP was able to carry out 11

executions with a spiritual advisor in the

- 1 chamber. It had a security person next to the
- 2 spiritual advisor at all times. Everything was
- 3 -- the position of the spiritual advisor varied
- 4 with the phase of the execution, as I described
- 5 earlier.
- 6 The BOP does do some auditory
- 7 monitoring during the administration of the
- 8 drugs, in particular, listening for any drip
- 9 from the IV lines. And it is also listening for
- 10 a particular snoring sound from the prisoner
- 11 that would indicate the pentobarbital is working
- 12 as it is supposed to, and it -- the chanting and
- 13 praying sometimes could interfere with that.
- 14 The BOP may do with visual and EKG
- 15 monitoring, and nothing went wrong when they --
- 16 when they did that, fortunately.
- 17 The BOP, I think, did not get a
- 18 request to physically touch the inmate during
- 19 the administration of the drugs. I think they
- 20 would have very, very substantial concerns about
- 21 that because of the risk of either advertent or
- inadvertent disruption of the IV lines.
- That risk may be low, but the harm, as
- 24 Justice Barrett was mentioning earlier, would be
- 25 extremely high. Also, unlike an -- an actual

- 1 prison employee, like a state or federal
- 2 chaplain, the outside spiritual advisor would
- 3 need to be removed if the medical team had to
- 4 come in, and that in itself could cause delay or
- 5 -- or problems.
- 6 And, frankly, Your Honor, I -- I also
- 7 think blocking the witnesses' views, which, you
- 8 know, now you're requiring two people, the
- 9 outside spiritual advisor and the security
- 10 person, is a legitimate concern here because one
- of the purposes of capital punishment is to
- 12 provide some closure to the victims. And, of
- course, we believe the inmate's family should be
- 14 able to witness this as well. And blocking
- 15 either of them from fully viewing the inmate at
- 16 the time of the execution is an important
- 17 factor.
- 18 JUSTICE ALITO: All that is helpful.
- Now, to follow up a little bit, we
- 20 have a picture of the execution room that Texas
- 21 uses. I don't know whether the execution room
- that the federal government has is a matter of
- 23 public record, anything about it, but can you
- 24 tell us whether there's anything that is
- 25 materially different about the -- what the

- 1 federal -- about the room that the federal
- 2 government uses or the procedures that would
- 3 suggest that the considerations in Texas should
- 4 be different from the considerations in Terre
- 5 Haute?
- 6 MR. FEIGIN: As to the chamber, Your
- 7 Honor, ours has about twice the square footage
- 8 of what I understand Texas's is, which is what
- 9 enables us to have the spiritual advisor about
- 10 nine feet away during the administration of the
- 11 drugs.
- 12 Before the administration of the
- drugs, the spiritual advisor was advised to
- stand at a line that's taped on the floor that's
- about 28 inches away from the gurney. I don't
- 16 know that the precise procedures we've used
- there would be feasible for Texas with its
- 18 smaller chamber.
- 19 I'm also not entirely clear on what
- 20 Texas's monitoring equipment exactly looks like
- 21 or the positioning of its windows. We have
- 22 separate galleries for the victim and inmate
- 23 witnesses, as well as the federal official
- 24 witnesses, and then another one for the medical
- 25 team, and they all need to be able to see in for

- 1 one reason or another.
- 2 And then there's auditory monitoring
- 3 equipment and medical monitoring equipment that
- 4 may differ there as well that may raise some
- 5 concerns too.
- 6 JUSTICE ALITO: I'm sorry to take up
- 7 so much time. If I could just ask one more
- 8 question. It relates to something that, to my
- 9 mind, is related to this, although it's a
- 10 different subject, and -- and that is I'm
- 11 interested in BOP practice regarding religious
- 12 services during a typical weekend.
- So, on a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, in
- 14 a federal prison, what religious services, if
- any, are prisoners allowed to attend? Do you
- 16 know the answer to that?
- 17 MR. FEIGIN: Your Honor, not -- not as
- 18 I stand here today, no.
- 19 JUSTICE ALITO: All right. Thank you
- 20 very much.
- 21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
- 22 Sotomayor, anything further?
- Justice Kagan?
- 24 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I have a few
- 25 follow-ups. I share Justice Alito's desire to

- 1 have a -- what I would call a bright-line rule
- 2 or -- or something, some guidelines, if -- if
- 3 Petitioner's position were to prevail here, and
- 4 it's helpful, your explanation, of what happened
- 5 in the federal executions. But I want to make
- 6 sure, following up on Justice Kagan's questions,
- 7 I understand what happened.
- There was no touching except in one,
- 9 is that correct?
- 10 MR. FEIGIN: That is our recollection,
- 11 Your Honor, yes.
- 12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: There was someone
- 13 present in 11 of the 13?
- 14 MR. FEIGIN: Yes.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. And they
- spoke aloud in all 11 of those?
- 17 MR. FEIGIN: In one of them, there
- 18 appears to have just been conversation before
- 19 the administration --
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay.
- 21 MR. FEIGIN: -- of the drugs.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And I --
- 23 MR. FEIGIN: In --
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Sorry, keep going.
- MR. FEIGIN: I'm sorry. In the rest

- of them, there was at least some prayer. And,
- 2 again, because of the somewhat underdetermined
- 3 word "execution," it's not entirely clear
- 4 whether the prayer was during the entire period
- 5 or just during the portion as the witnesses were
- 6 coming in and the spiritual advisor and the
- 7 inmate were alone with the federal officials.
- 8 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And if I'm
- 9 interpreting you correctly, but correct --
- 10 correct me if I'm wrong, you have much more
- 11 concern -- you're okay with someone being in the
- 12 room or at least BOP was, during these, okay
- with audible? It doesn't seem like you're okay
- 14 as you stand here today with someone touching
- during the execution, putting to the side the --
- or maybe you don't want to put it to the side --
- 17 the question of what the execution is.
- 18 MR. FEIGIN: Well, Your Honor, just to
- 19 be clear, I mean, I'm not quite sure I'd
- 20 represent that we were okay with it. It was
- just BOP was able to accommodate it.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay.
- 23 MR. FEIGIN: And I think BOP would
- 24 have a vastly greater degree of concern for the
- 25 reasons I mentioned earlier about accommodating

- 1 a request to have the spiritual advisor in
- 2 physical contact with the inmate.
- I mean, if I could just emphasize one
- 4 thing that I think really came out in the
- 5 Gutierrez litigation after this Court remanded,
- 6 is that Texas, you know, points out, and I think
- 7 they point it out here but not to the same
- 8 degree, even -- it's not just a matter of not
- 9 trusting a spiritual advisor. It's a very
- 10 fraught circumstance.
- 11 You don't know how someone's going to
- 12 react in that circumstance. I mean, I -- I -- I
- realize this probably wouldn't happen to most
- 14 people, but someone could faint, someone could
- 15 stumble, and it -- you could jostle the lines.
- 16 That might or might not disrupt them.
- But, if that were to happen in the
- 18 middle of the pentobarbital, all of the problems
- in, for example, the Lockett execution in
- 20 Oklahoma were because the IV was going into the
- 21 tissue as opposed to into the vein, and anything
- 22 going wrong here would be catastrophic.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And then, to
- 24 follow up on Justice Barrett's question and my
- earlier questions about the risk, the State's

- 1 compelling interest in reducing the risk to zero
- or as close to zero as possible given what we've
- 3 mandated under RLUIPA, you said, I think, at the
- 4 beginning, the State would need state-specific
- 5 reasons to justify that.
- 6 And I'm wondering how a state could
- 7 say: We have a state-specific reason for
- 8 wanting to reduce the risk to as close to zero
- 9 as possible.
- 10 MR. FEIGIN: Well, I think this is
- 11 where Holt's and Cutter's emphasis on
- 12 substantial deference to prison administrators'
- expertise comes in. We certainly do not think
- that courts should be micromanaging prison
- 15 procedures. But I -- I think Holt identifies
- 16 the practices of other jurisdictions as at least
- 17 another least restrictive means that the state
- 18 needs to, in Holt's words, give persuasive
- 19 reasons why it can't follow.
- So, if a number of other
- 21 jurisdictions, and, here, the federal government
- 22 and Alabama, have been able to allow outside
- 23 spiritual advisors, I think what Texas would
- 24 need to do but hasn't done yet and may or may
- 25 not be able to do is to say things that are of

- 1 the nature of what I was discussing earlier with
- 2 Justice Alito: We have different monitoring
- 3 equipment. We -- our chamber is not the same
- 4 size as the federal government's. We rely more
- 5 heavily on certain types of monitoring than the
- 6 federal government does.
- 7 And I also think they could
- 8 legitimately decide to tolerate a lower degree
- 9 of risk than the federal government was willing
- 10 to accommodate. I think --
- 11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
- 12 Barrett, anything further?
- MR. FEIGIN: I'm sorry.
- 14 JUSTICE BARRETT: Yes, Mr. Feigin, I
- just have two quick questions. One is to follow
- 16 up. I think Justice Kavanaugh was asking a very
- important question about how do we define the
- 18 state interest. And I -- I feel like you gave
- 19 him a lot of examples of least restrictive
- 20 alternatives but maybe not the compelling
- 21 interest.
- MR. FEIGIN: Sure.
- JUSTICE BARRETT: I'm just wondering
- 24 if it's legitimate to define it as trying to get
- 25 to zero percent risk, because, you know, Justice

- 1 Alito asked you about services on the weekends.
- 2 I -- I think -- it's my understanding, I might
- 3 be wrong -- that BOP and -- and state prisons
- 4 too do allow some religious services, perhaps
- 5 because of RLUIPA. If they said, we want the
- 6 risk of prison rioting or fighting to be
- 7 zero percent, that would permit the prison,
- 8 right, to say there can never be any kind of
- 9 prayer service or gathering?
- 10 But, if the compelling interest were
- defined differently, like, for example, to say
- maintaining prison security, then that wouldn't
- 13 rule out those kinds of gatherings.
- And so, here, if -- if the prison
- defines the compelling interest in saying, like,
- 16 well, we in Alabama want a zero percent risk or
- 17 we in Texas want only a 2 percent risk, that
- 18 permits them to -- to altogether bar the
- 19 spiritual advisor from the chamber, right,
- 20 because there's not going to be any, you know,
- 21 lesser restrictive alternative that's going to
- 22 get you there. It always -- it's -- inherently
- 23 carries a risk.
- So how would the federal government
- 25 articulate what the acceptable state compelling

1 interest is? 2 MR. FEIGIN: Well, I think RLUIPA kind 3 of presupposes that you can't ever get to zero percent risk on anything for the reasons 4 that you just mentioned, Justice Barrett. 5 I -- I do think courts are interfering 6 7 a little bit too much under the Holt standard if they're kind of micromanaging between, like -- I 8 9 mean, not that anyone could ever get precise 10 empirical numbers, but, like, 10 and 5 percent 11 risk. 12 But I -- I -- I think the -- just to 13 answer your question directly, the question you 14 asked my friend directly, we think the 15 compelling interest here in this particular 16 context is in carrying out the execution 17 procedure effectively and -- which both means 18 making sure it goes correctly for the prisoner 19 and also making sure the purposes of the 20 judgment are satisfied. 21 And, obviously, even having a 2.2 spiritual advisor in the chamber does create 23 some degree of risk even if they're nine feet

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away, but I -- I think courts could probably set

a minimum bar on risk tolerance. And one place

24

- 1 to look is the experience of other
- 2 jurisdictions.
- I think courts should be very hesitant
- 4 outside of that to start suggesting that these
- 5 kinds of things need to be allowed. But, if you
- 6 see that other jurisdictions are permitting
- 7 them, it places under Holt at least somewhat of
- 8 a modest burden on the state to give some
- 9 reasons, which would themselves get deference
- 10 for their administrators, as to why they
- 11 couldn't similarly accommodate it. And they may
- 12 well have such reasons here.
- JUSTICE BARRETT: One other just brief
- 14 question. Justice Kagan was asking you about
- 15 how BOP carries out these executions and
- 16 determines its standards, and you said it was an
- individualized process with respect to each of
- 18 the inmates.
- 19 Presumably, though, BOP had to make
- 20 some decisions about standards that would apply
- 21 to each one. Like you mentioned, there was tape
- on the floor and the spiritual advisor had to
- 23 stand on the tape or that there would be a
- 24 security officer present.
- Was there any kind of discussion or

- 1 consultation with prison administrators or
- 2 experts before the 11 executions were carried
- 3 out to decide, well, these are -- you know, this
- 4 is the minimum, they can't get any closer than
- 5 this tape on the floor?
- 6 MR. FEIGIN: Your Honor, I'm not
- 7 precisely sure why they decided on that specific
- 8 distance. I think they wanted them close for --
- 9 wanted to allow them to be close for that
- 10 portion of it but not too close.
- 11 The concern there was simply making
- 12 sure that the security official would still be
- in position to try to stop the advisor from
- doing something that might interfere with the
- 15 execution.
- 16 I -- I don't know the precise content
- of the discussions that BOP had ahead of time,
- but there was clearly a great deal of thinking.
- 19 Even -- even during periods where federal
- 20 executions are in a moratorium, they rehearse
- 21 this essentially semi-annually, what the
- 22 procedures are going to look like. It's a very
- 23 choreographed procedure with a lot of thought
- 24 into it.
- JUSTICE BARRETT: Thank you.

- 1 MR. FEIGIN: Sorry, Mr. Chief Justice.
- 2 Thank you.
- 3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
- 4 counsel.
- 5 General Stone.
- 6 ORAL ARGUMENT OF JUDD E. STONE, II,
- 7 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENTS
- 8 MR. STONE: Thank you, Mr. Chief
- 9 Justice, and may it please the Court:
- 10 Petitioner has twice received the
- 11 extremely exceptional remedy of having his
- 12 execution halted at the last minute. Each time
- 13 he litigates around an execution date, he
- 14 receives another lengthy reprieve.
- 15 This Court should not countenance the
- 16 delay of a fourth execution date.
- 17 Ramirez claims that he has
- 18 consistently sought the same relief, namely, his
- 19 pastor's touch and audible prayer, throughout
- 20 his piecemeal litigation.
- 21 There are two problems with that
- 22 assertion. First, it's false. Ramirez
- 23 disclaimed in 2020 that he wanted pastoral
- touch. And in April 2021, Texas gave Ramirez
- 25 all that he had been looking for at that time,

1 his pastor's presence in the execution chamber. 2 Second, Ramirez's assertion makes his 3 litigation conduct inexplicable. If Ramirez was aware the entire time that he wanted pastoral 4 touch and audible prayer, then he has no excuse 5 for failing to timely raise and grieve those 6 7 requests. Ramirez tries to excuse both his 8 failures to -- both his delays and his failures 9 10 to exhaust by claiming he only learned he 11 wouldn't be permitted touch or audible prayer in 12 June and August of this year, respectively. 13 Again, false. The -- the State's 14 execution procedures publicly available as of 15 this April state that a pastor may "observe the 16 inmate's execution." An observer's role is 17 passive, not interactive. 18 Ramirez knew his pastor's observation 19 and his pastor's participation were distinct 20 because he himself distinguished them. Ramirez 21 stated in August that he assumed his pastor 2.2 could not audibly pray, and he distinguished 23 touch from presence in his 2020 suit. 24 Ramirez has delayed in seeking 25 accommodations, reversed his litigation

- 1 positions, and raised his claims seriatim, all
- 2 for the purposes of delay. This Court should
- 3 put an end to these tactics once and for all.
- I welcome the Court's questions.
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Counsel, how
- 6 would you deal with the hypothetical I was
- 7 raising earlier, which is, you know, a few days
- 8 before execution the prisoner says, I've decided
- 9 I need to convert to a particular faith and the
- 10 process takes three months, and there's a --
- there's a religion in which that is true, that
- 12 it takes three months.
- What -- what -- would you -- what
- 14 would you do?
- MR. STONE: Certainly, Your Honor.
- 16 So, for purposes of -- and I assume that this
- 17 prisoner is raising a RLUIPA claim and asking
- 18 for a preliminary injunction against his
- 19 execution?
- 20 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Yeah, because
- 21 it takes three months, and that's what his --
- 22 the faith that he wants to pursue takes.
- 23 MR. STONE: Well, Your Honor, first, I
- 24 think the -- the court would have to determine
- 25 whether or not that was a sincere conversion.

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1
                CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, right.
 2
      That's --
 3
               MR. STONE: Right.
               CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: -- what I'm
 4
 5
      asking you.
 6
               MR. STONE: That's right.
 7
                CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: How would you
      -- what would you do to make sure you've
 8
      accommodated that concern?
 9
10
               MR. STONE: The court would go -- go
11
      into a pretext inquiry as discussed in the RFRA
12
      context in Footnote 28 of Hobby Lobby. It would
      look into factors like, for example, how is this
13
      individual -- how has this individual behaved in
14
15
      the past? Have they made any similar --
16
                CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, he had a
17
      conversion experience. I suspect impending
     death focuses people's concerns on religion in a
18
19
     way they may not have been before. And with
     death imminent, he decided he needed this --
20
21
     needed to pursue this route to salvation.
2.2
                MR. STONE: On just those facts alone,
23
     Your Honor, it would sound to me that, with
24
     nothing else, that -- that the individual might
25
     be seeking delay of his execution because
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- 1 several days beforehand he's requesting a
- 2 multi-month process. But I think that would be
- 3 a -- a credibility determination and -- and that
- 4 would be --
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, but --
- 6 yeah, I understand that. But how would you do
- 7 that? I mean, it is a factually plausible
- 8 thing. I mean, people convert and particularly
- 9 in times of stress. There is a church that
- 10 requires three months. Maybe he's not sincere,
- 11 but how do you tell?
- 12 MR. STONE: You look at other
- 13 collateral circumstances, such as whether or not
- there had been previous contact with a pastor
- that, you know, sort of engendered a spiritual
- 16 relationship beforehand, whether or not the
- 17 person had raised similar claims beforehand and,
- if so, when relative to previous execution
- 19 dates.
- Whether or not this is, in fact, the
- 21 kind of -- whether or not this individual has
- 22 brought other basically pretextual or baseless
- lawsuits, I think these would all be the kinds
- of facts and circumstances that would help a
- 25 district court make the familiar inquiry as to

- whether or not basically they're being lied to,
- 2 the same pretext inquiry that occurs in
- 3 virtually every area of law.
- 4 Undoubtedly, because this is a very
- 5 sensitive area of law and a very sensitive area
- 6 of human experience, it's going to require --
- 7 it's going to require an examination of a lot of
- 8 facts and circumstances around the individual.
- 9 And it may be the case that district
- judges making this factual determination for the
- 11 first time are going to tend to give some
- 12 deference to an individual on the surface of
- 13 things.
- 14 But Congress has placed that initial
- 15 burden on the individual trying to show
- 16 sincerity. So, at a minimum, that person has to
- 17 start by adducing some proof that they have a
- 18 sincere need.
- 19 JUSTICE BARRETT: General Stone, can I
- 20 ask you -- you just said that the April 2020
- 21 policy said that the -- that the prisoner could
- 22 have a spiritual advisor observe in the room.
- 23 Could you direct me to where it says
- 24 that? Because I'm looking at the policy and it
- 25 talks about the spiritual advisor being present

- in the room, and I think that's a significant
- 2 difference.
- 3 So does it say "observe"?
- 4 MR. STONE: It's the April 2021
- 5 policy, Justice Barrett. Let me get you that
- 6 page.
- JUSTICE BARRETT: I'm -- I'm sorry.
- 8 I'm looking at the April 2021 policy. Maybe you
- 9 could get that for me.
- 10 MR. STONE: Of course. It's on page
- 11 149 of the Joint Appendix, of the Joint
- 12 Appendix. In Part D, Part 1, it says, to read
- 13 the relevant quote: "If requested by the
- inmate" -- towards the bottom, it says, "will be
- 15 escorted into the execution chamber by an agency
- 16 representative to observe the inmate's
- 17 execution."
- 18 JUSTICE BARRETT: Okay. Thank you
- 19 very much.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I mean, I've
- 21 gone through -- or we have in my chambers the
- 22 dates, and there's an argument about this. I
- 23 mean, they say, look, in -- you used to allow
- 24 spiritual advisors in. No problem. Then you
- decided in 2019, no, they can't come in.

- So, in 2020, after we got through with
- it, he says, please, let them in, okay? And he
- doesn't say anything about laying on of hands
- 4 because, you know, letting them in is better
- 5 than nothing. You say, no, they can't come in.
- Then we get to 2022, and he says, come
- 7 on, let him in. And you say, okay, we'll let
- 8 him in.
- 9 And at that point, they say: Huh,
- 10 pretty good, fine, and we want the hands and the
- audible prayer too. That's what you used to do.
- 12 And you say: Ha, you didn't ask for
- 13 that before. Of course, they didn't. They
- 14 thought they couldn't come in at all. And --
- and so now you're asking for it. All right.
- 16 The answer is no.
- 17 All right. So here we are. And --
- 18 and -- and as I go through this, I think that
- 19 they have a point. Maybe you have a point.
- 20 What are we supposed to do? Send it back for
- 21 that?
- MR. STONE: Two points, Your Honor.
- I think there are at least two clear
- 24 places where Mr. Ramirez certainly should have
- 25 had notice that he needed to look into this.

- 1 The first one is in 2019, when TDCJ first
- 2 changed its policies --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Yes.
- 4 MR. STONE: -- partially in response
- 5 to this Court's decision in Murphy. At that
- 6 point, TDCJ's policy was no pastors in the
- 7 chamber at all.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Yeah.
- 9 MR. STONE: Because what he wanted was
- 10 not only a pastor in the chamber but other
- things that are sort of logically subsequent to
- that, by being told you may not have a pastor in
- the chamber, he's being told you may not have
- any of those other things too.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Well, I mean, it's
- very technical and it's excellent lawyering,
- but, you know, you sit there and you read it,
- and you used to let them in, and now he reads it
- and says no, they can't come in. And we have
- the case still, and, finally, it gets out of
- 21 here, and you go back and, no, they can't come
- 22 in.
- So, obviously, he says, please let him
- in. And then, finally, when you change and let
- 25 them in, he says, by the way, we would like

- hands plus -- I'm just repeating myself -- hands
- 2 plus audible prayer. That's what you used to
- 3 do.
- 4 Now -- now, as I say it like that, you
- 5 know, it sounds as if they had been fairly
- 6 reasonable. But, as you say, well, you say, but
- 7 they didn't really ask for it. I say, okay, you
- 8 have a point. And -- and so my question was,
- 9 what do we do about that? And I have a question
- on the merits too, but go ahead with that.
- 11 MR. STONE: Sure. Well, Your Honor,
- this Court's rule, as articulated in Hill and in
- 13 Bucklew, places the obligation on the capital
- inmate who's going to raise claims to do so in a
- 15 diligent manner so as to not require the
- 16 equitable relief staying his execution. He's
- 17 under that burden and an obligation -- a burden
- of bringing claims diligently includes a burden
- 19 to investigate.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Okay. Okay. I got
- 21 your point.
- MR. STONE: Right.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Now, on the merits,
- 24 I'd like to know this: Do you have any idea how
- 25 many executions have there been -- let's go back

- 1 a hundred years, okay -- where they did let
- 2 spiritual advisors in somewhere? I don't care,
- 3 United States, do it as you want, what --
- 4 depending on what you know. They let the
- 5 spiritual advisors in, there was physical
- 6 touching, and there was audible prayer.
- 7 Was the answer zero? Was the answer
- 8 --
- 9 MR. STONE: Certainly not.
- JUSTICE BREYER: No? Certainly not?
- 11 MR. STONE: Certainly not zero.
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: What -- what -- what
- was the answer about? Can you guess?
- MR. STONE: It was commonplace in
- 15 executions --
- 16 JUSTICE BREYER: Okay.
- 17 MR. STONE: -- in Texas between 1982
- 18 and 2019.
- 19 JUSTICE BREYER: Okay. So someplace
- it's commonplace. In how many of those did the
- 21 audibility and the physical touching create the
- 22 execution going astray? Are you aware of any?
- MR. STONE: No, Your Honor --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Okay.
- MR. STONE: -- though I would point

- 1 out --
- 2 JUSTICE BREYER: So we have experience
- and there's never been a problem. All right.
- 4 That's -- that's what you think. I mean, I
- 5 don't know if you think it, but, I mean, at
- 6 least that's the best you can answer.
- 7 MR. STONE: I -- I would also add an
- 8 important -- an important distinction, Your
- 9 Honor, is that for every one of those
- 10 circumstances, the individual is a TDCJ
- 11 employee. And it turns out TDCJ is a
- 12 correctional institution dealing with the
- extraordinarily charged and choreographed area
- of -- of a death chamber.
- There is a very significant difference
- between having an outsider with no relationship
- 17 whatsoever --
- JUSTICE KAGAN: Are you aware in any
- other states of an execution going astray
- 20 because of an outside spiritual advisor?
- MR. STONE: No, Justice Kagan, though
- I do -- we reached out to other states, and
- 23 because this is very new in the handful of
- 24 jurisdictions that allow it, I'm not surprised
- 25 that we have none of them. This is the sort of

- 1 thing we would anticipate to be a very low
- 2 likelihood of occurring. It just has a
- 3 catastrophic potential of potential damage if it
- 4 did.
- 5 JUSTICE BARRETT: Given that
- 6 catastrophic risk, the question that I asked Mr.
- 7 Feigin and your friend on the other side about
- 8 what the definition of the State's compelling
- 9 interest is, could you give us yours?
- 10 MR. STONE: Of course, Your Honor. I
- 11 think Justice Kavanaugh accurately or almost
- 12 accurately summarizes that we're attempting to
- 13 minimize risk almost all the way to zero, as --
- 14 as much as we reasonably can.
- I -- I take the point that you have
- that if that's the State's compelling interest
- 17 going forward in all sorts of contexts, that
- that sounds an awful lot like a license for the
- 19 State to just reject religious claims.
- 20 I think the Court's -- the Court's
- 21 articulated deference in Holt v. Hobbs and other
- 22 similar cases and the sort of span of that
- 23 deference is what does a lot of work in this
- 24 case. So, for example, this Court rejected
- 25 deference to these sorts of claims of minimizing

- 1 risk in Holt precisely because the policy was
- 2 under-inclusive, it seemed incredibly hard to
- 3 believe that contraband could be held in a
- 4 half-inch beard, situations like that.
- 5 To the extent that you have a -- a
- 6 correctional institution saying that we have to
- 7 ban -- we have to ban all church services
- 8 because there's too high of a chance of a riot,
- 9 there's -- it sounds in that hypothetical it's
- just a very bad ends/means fit between the thing
- 11 that was ultimately chosen and the -- and the
- 12 pursuit of the sort of minimization of risk or
- at least a policy that appears to be sacrificing
- a whole lot of potential RFRA rights.
- 15 And in that case, I think that the
- 16 Court's deference to the stated security
- 17 concerns of -- of the administrative -- of the
- 18 -- of the agency should be a lot lower, if only
- 19 because, like I said, you've got this very
- 20 over-inclusive sort of policy. And these
- 21 over-inclusion and under-inclusion analyses are
- 22 very typical of when this Court says, well, we
- 23 defer to prison administrators as experts, but
- 24 we're not sure about this particular policy.
- 25 I think that would take care of at

- 1 least a lot of the concerns that you have.
- 2 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You have to think
- about the risk together with the harm, correct?
- 4 MR. STONE: That's exactly right. So
- 5 --
- 6 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: So the risk is
- 7 low, but the potential harm, as you used the
- 8 word, and I think Mr. Feigin agreed with this,
- 9 catastrophic or some adjective similar to that,
- 10 so those two things need to be thought about
- 11 together?
- MR. STONE: That's exactly right, Your
- 13 Honor. Texas being unwilling to tolerate a very
- small amount of risk in the death chamber, where
- 15 a tiny amount of risk can lead to a situation
- 16 that would be -- that would create intolerable
- pain for an inmate or an intolerable amount of
- 18 reliving of suffering for a victim -- for the
- 19 victim's families or any of these very high --
- 20 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: What -- what about
- 21 --
- 22 MR. STONE: -- sort of very high
- 23 negative value problems.
- JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- what about Mr.
- 25 Feigin's description of the experience and then

- 1 our effort to balance the competing interests
- 2 here under a test, the strict scrutiny test,
- 3 that is difficult to apply here, as I think
- 4 everyone would acknowledge? The advisor's
- 5 allowed in the room. There can be audible
- 6 prayer before the drugs are administered. No
- 7 touching. Is that something Texas could live
- 8 with?
- 9 MR. STONE: Well, Your Honor, one of
- 10 the major problems is -- was alluded to in the
- 11 -- in the logistics of the federal execution
- 12 room is that it's just much, much larger than
- 13 Texas's. I might point out that's one major
- 14 difference because, in Texas, we can
- functionally only have about three people. It's
- 16 about a 9-by-12 room. Most of one wall is taken
- 17 up by windows for the inmate -- for -- rather,
- 18 for witnesses on behalf of the inmate's
- 19 families. The other is witnesses of the
- 20 victim's. On the other side, we have a large
- 21 window for the medical team to view and IV lines
- 22 coming in. So the much smaller space makes it
- 23 much more difficult to navigate.
- 24 In terms of the sort of -- in terms of
- your sort of general point that I think you're

- 1 getting at as to whether or not Texas might be
- 2 able to accommodate something that was
- 3 significantly less intrusive of a request, Texas
- 4 is obligated under -- under RFRA and RLUIPA to
- 5 take these prison requests one at a time.
- 6 In the event that someone said, I want
- 7 a five-second blessing and then my pastor can
- 8 step outside, that would be obviously something
- 9 that would be much less intrusive, that would --
- 10 that would bear much less of a risk and that
- 11 Texas would have to have an awfully good reason
- 12 to refuse.
- The reason why that doesn't work here
- is because Mr. Ramirez is insistent that he's
- wanted the same thing the whole time. He's
- wanted touch and prayer the entire duration of
- 17 the -- of the execution from beginning all the
- 18 way to end.
- 19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, that goes --
- 20 JUSTICE KAGAN: The size of the room
- 21 did not prevent many, many chaplains in Texas's
- 22 history from providing both touch and prayer, is
- 23 that right?
- 24 MR. STONE: No, Justice Kagan, but it
- did indirectly in that when we had chaplains in

- 1 the room, we didn't need to have another
- 2 security officer in the room. And so the fact
- 3 that we have a volunteer coming into the room,
- 4 the chaplain has to now be -- now has to be
- 5 accompanied by a security officer, which
- 6 required us to take out the warden.
- 7 So it did change -- it did change how
- 8 we had to run the room, but the chaplain himself
- 9 did not add to the risk, no.
- 10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: That was, again,
- 11 the state official, right? The state --
- MR. STONE: Yes, Your Honor, it was.
- 13 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- official
- 14 chaplain.
- 15 MR. STONE: That's right.
- 16 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: That's different
- 17 -- at least to me, that's a somewhat different
- 18 situation. It may not be to others.
- 19 You were switching, though, to
- 20 sincerity in this case, and I get you have a
- 21 whole argument about sincerity in this case, but
- 22 we may also have to opine on compelling interest
- 23 and least restrictive alternatives.
- Just on the -- looking to other
- 25 states, how do we do that? You know, Alabama

- does it. Why can't Texas? That's the argument
- 2 -- I -- I'm simplifying, but that's kind of the
- 3 argument on the other side as to some of this.
- 4 Your response?
- 5 MR. STONE: Sure, Your Honor. In
- 6 particular with Alabama, I think the Court,
- 7 however it's going to set down rules, needs to
- 8 make sure it's really engaging in an
- 9 apples-to-apples comparison.
- 10 The request in Alabama was much
- 11 briefer. I understand that it was a brief touch
- 12 with holy oils to essentially administer the
- last rights, and that's something significantly
- 14 less intrusive risk-wise than what's being
- 15 presented in Texas.
- 16 All else equal, if someone in Texas
- 17 were to -- if someone in Texas were to present
- 18 that same request as in Alabama, the fact
- 19 Alabama was able to provide it would be a piece
- 20 of evidence, not necessarily dispositive, but at
- 21 least something to the extent that Alabama has a
- 22 similar execution protocol and a similar
- 23 execution room.
- 24 JUSTICE KAGAN: General, why isn't the
- 25 inquiry really exactly how Holt laid out the

- 1 inquiry? In other words, you know, in Holt, the
- 2 prison officials came in and said men can put
- 3 contraband in their beards and we have a
- 4 security interest in preventing that.
- 5 And what the Court said was, you know
- 6 what, I mean, that might be, but we're going to
- 7 look around at other states, see what other
- 8 practices are. To the extent most other states
- 9 or many other states can deal with the security
- 10 interests in a way that also respects religious
- interests of the inmate, then we're going,
- 12 essentially, to, you know, say to the state why
- 13 not you too?
- 14 And in all of that, there is an
- 15 appropriate level of deference given to prison
- 16 officials, but there's also an appropriate level
- of respect given to the inmate with religious
- 18 convictions, as commanded by Congress.
- MR. STONE: I don't think we're very
- 20 far apart, Justice Kagan. I think that to the
- 21 extent that we're dealing with many states that
- 22 are similarly situated as in having the same
- 23 kind of execution protocol and similarly
- 24 substantial execution rooms, that if many states
- 25 had that same experience that, in fact, there

- wasn't a risk or the -- the risk didn't manifest
- 2 after a long period of time, that would be
- 3 powerful evidence that a given state, for
- 4 example, Texas in this case, couldn't
- 5 legitimately say we can't do this without
- 6 unacceptably adding to our risk.
- 7 I was speaking more specifically that
- 8 to the extent that this Court's going to look at
- 9 other states as like examples for purposes of --
- 10 of engaging exactly that kind of state
- 11 comparison that you bring up, Justice Kagan,
- that the Court's making sure it's getting like
- 13 things like.
- 14 And the kind of fact that might fall
- by the wayside for purposes of comparison is the
- 16 federal government has just a much larger
- 17 chamber, and that's an important fact. Whether
- or not it should be sufficient to justify a
- 19 policy -- a policy difference in one or many
- 20 cases, that's obviously going to be
- 21 case-specific and up to this Court.
- 22 But that's what I sort of was
- 23 exhorting, was that you can't take one
- 24 particular institution or one particular
- 25 execution as dispositive for that analysis.

1	JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Counsel
2	JUSTICE ALITO: If Mr if Mr.
3	Ramirez is going to be executed, would a new
4	execution date have to be set?
5	MR. STONE: Yes, Justice Alito.
6	JUSTICE ALITO: And that would that
7	would have to be at least 90 days from when?
8	MR. STONE: As a practical matter,
9	Your Honor, first of all, a date has to be a
LO	state court has to be petitioned to set another
L1	date. No state court in Texas is going to do
L2	that while this Court has a case on the merits
L3	pending regarding you have an execution.
L4	After that occurs, it would be at
L5	least 91 days from when the trial judge is
L6	grants the motion. As a practical matter, it
L7	tends to be about four to seven months, as this
L8	Court could see regarding Mr. Ramirez's dates.
L9	JUSTICE ALITO: And would there be any
20	reason why Mr. Ramirez could not exhaust any
21	grievances he has about the way the execution
22	will be carried out during that period?
23	MR. STONE: Well, Your Honor, I
24	believe he actually so he hasn't exhausted
2.5	either of the two as of right now. The

- 1 exhaustion came after he'd filed loss -- the --
- 2 his lawsuit regarding physical touch.
- 3 So I believe, if that were dismissed
- 4 for exhaustion, that would be without prejudice
- 5 or at least with leave to refile based on the
- 6 district court's analysis of that.
- 7 The other audible claim -- audible
- 8 prayer one, he's had notice of that for more
- 9 than 15 days. This Court in Woodford has noted
- 10 that a prisoner has to engage in exhaustion
- 11 proper, not just exhaustion simpliciter. And
- 12 because TDCJ's consistent policy is that you
- have to raise a first step grievance within 15
- days of the arising of the problem, his refusal
- 15 to do so would mean he couldn't exhaust that
- one.
- 17 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Counsel, I
- 18 understand that prisoners -- you don't have any
- 19 rules that say prisoners can't pray out loud
- 20 during the execution, correct?
- MR. STONE: No, Your Honor. And, in
- 22 fact --
- 23 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. So you
- 24 tolerate their noise.
- 25 Number two, you were talking about the

- 1 fact that you didn't understand his request in
- 2 -- in June to "touch and pray over me," that it
- 3 would be verbal.
- 4 How was he supposed to understand from
- 5 the word "observe" in your April -- in your
- 6 April 21 change of execution policy that
- 7 "observe" meant no touching and no praying?
- 8 Observing, it had happened before.
- 9 So all I'm suggesting to you is you
- 10 can defend your position. He's defended his.
- 11 To me, prayer -- silent prayer, you don't have
- 12 to ask permission for.
- I suspect that many of your people in
- that room, even though they're DOJ employees,
- also pray silently, and no one would question
- that their prayer would be in their head.
- 17 So all I'm suggesting is lack of
- 18 clarity exists on both sides, but you can fix
- 19 yours by making your rules clearer. He tried to
- 20 fix his by filing a grievance less than a month,
- 21 weeks after you announced your policy on May 4.
- 22 You returned his grievance saying your
- 23 spiritual advisor can come. Weeks later,
- 24 Petitioner's counsel e-mails you and asks you if
- touching will be allowed. June 11, three days

- 1 later, Petitioner files his grievance and says
- 2 "allow Moore to touch and pray over me."
- 3 You deny that almost a month later,
- 4 July 2. And on July 8, he files a grievance,
- 5 but you don't respond to that over a month
- 6 later. What were you doing six weeks later?
- 7 MR. STONE: Your Honor, if I recall
- 8 correctly, we responded in 36 days. TDCJ's
- 9 manual state that these grievances can take up
- 10 to 40 days to respond. We try to be faster.
- 11 TDCJ receives quite a few --
- 12 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: What was so slow
- 13 -- why were you so slow here? The execution's
- 14 going to be in September. If you don't want
- there to be delay, what took you so long?
- MR. STONE: Well, Your Honor, TDCJ
- 17 still responded within the amount of time that
- 18 the manual says --
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Yeah, but at some
- 20 point, that becomes ineffective as a remedy --
- 21 MR. STONE: Well --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- if you're going
- 23 to butt up against the execution date purposely.
- MR. STONE: -- respectfully, Your
- 25 Honor, I think that means that Ramirez was under

- 1 an obligation to bring his grievance earlier.
- 2 At a very minimum, passing by the
- 3 public announcement of the changed protocols,
- 4 passing by the fact he had notice of everything
- 5 he would have needed to bring his RLUIPA
- 6 lawsuits in 2019, he received actual notice in
- 7 the form of his returned grievance saying you
- 8 may have your pastor --
- 9 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: On May -- in May.
- 10 MR. STONE: May 4, I believe, that's
- 11 right.
- 12 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And within weeks,
- 13 he filed his grievance --
- MR. STONE: He's in May --
- 15 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- in the same
- 16 amount of time that you took to deny it.
- 17 MR. STONE: He's in May 2021, Your
- 18 Honor, and he has a September execution date.
- 19 He waits to file his first grievance not May
- 20 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th. He waits until the middle
- of June. So he takes a third of the time he has
- left for purposes of figuring out whether or not
- he's entitled to the extremely exceptional stay
- of an -- of an execution at the last minute.
- 25 Spends it not grieving. Then he gets a

- 1 grievance in. Then TDCJ takes much less than
- 2 the 40 days back.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Thirty-six, four
- 4 days less. Thirty-six days.
- 5 MR. STONE: In the first return -- in
- 6 the return of the June grievance, I believe we
- 7 -- we received it on the -- on the 14th. We
- 8 returned it on July 5 for that first step
- 9 grievance, so far faster than 40 days. We
- 10 returned it certainly diligently.
- 11 Then he files a Step 2 on the 8th, and
- 12 then we end up filing 36 days -- we end up
- returning it to him 36 days later, and he's
- 14 already sued.
- 15 At a bare minimum, if -- if Mr.
- 16 Ramirez thought that the grievance process was
- 17 unavailable, which he'd be incorrect about
- legally and descriptively, at a minimum, then he
- 19 shouldn't have waited until the very end to
- 20 bring his lawsuit.
- 21 If he was going to go and file a
- 22 lawsuit regardless of whether or not he'd
- received a second step grievance response, then
- 24 he should have done everyone a favor and sued in
- 25 May.

1	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
2	counsel.
3	Justice Thomas, anything further?
4	JUSTICE THOMAS: No questions.
5	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice
6	Breyer?
7	Justice Alito?
8	Justice Sotomayor?
9	Justice Gorsuch?
LO	Justice Barrett? No?
L1	Thank you very much, counsel.
L2	Rebuttal, Mr. Kretzer.
L3	REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF SETH KRETZER
L4	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER
L5	MR. KRETZER: Yes, Mr. Chief Justice.
L6	I think perhaps one of the most
L7	alarming things that my friend General Stone
L8	said in his argument was that the TDCJ now has
L9	the affirmative power under their logic to
20	front-run, impede, cut off, whatever you want to
21	call it, the ability to file a 1983 case by
22	their delay of the Level 2 exhaustion.
23	The three most catalytic pages of this
24	entire record and the lodged materials, 11, 12,
25	and 13 it's also at mage 53 of the Joint

- 1 Appendix, and this is where Mr. Ramirez filed --
- 2 this was in June that he said the "and pray over
- 3 me" language, it was denied in boilerplate on
- 4 July 2.
- 5 The August 19 -- 16 denial -- this is
- 6 on page 13 -- has the exact same language.
- 7 Someone literally just took the same typewriter
- 8 and put the exact same thing and stamped there
- 9 on August 16. It sat there for six weeks.
- 10 This page 13 appears in the lodged
- 11 grievance file. It's not in the Joint Appendix
- 12 because it was never received by the attorney.
- 13 In other words, TDCJ, Mr. Stone said they can
- 14 take up -- we returned it in 36 days. We have
- 15 40.
- 16 Under their own internal protocols,
- they could give themselves another 40 days to
- 18 respond to it, in which case they would have
- 19 returned the Level 2 grievance after Mr. Ramirez
- 20 was already executed.
- 21 That is the implication of how they
- 22 are trying to construe exhaustion in this case.
- 23 And there were several questions to me in my
- 24 opening about what would the larger implications
- 25 be for other cases.

1	If this Court adopts Mr. Stone's
2	logic, I predict you will see the word go out to
3	prisons across the country that they now have
4	this wonderful tool to insulate their policies,
5	whatever they may be, from federal review under
6	1983 because they can put off the Level 2
7	grievance as long as they care to.
8	I would point out Justice
9	Kavanaugh, you asked me in my opening about the
10	risk of, as you perceived, the non-TDCJ employee
11	chaplains being greater than TDCJ employee
12	chaplains. I would just point out that the drug
13	team members are not TDCJ employees. And the
14	botched executions you've heard about from both
15	sides, most famously Mr. Lockett in Oklahoma,
16	those botched executions were apparently caused
17	by these individuals who were not TDCJ
18	employees.
19	If the real concern is the compelling
20	interest, the safety of the security
21	protocols of the execution, I would submit
22	history has shown that it's these non-TDCJ
23	employees non-prison employees, in these
24	other cases, that have caused these executions,
25	not anything caused by any chaplain.

1	There simply exists as far as				
2	everyone has looked for a hundred years, Justice				
3	Breyer, or longer, there is not a single				
4	instance of any chaplain ever causing any such				
5	disturbance.				
6	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,				
7	counsel. The case is submitted.				
8	(Whereupon, at 12:54 p.m., the case				
9	was submitted.)				
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