
Atheist Exceptionalism: Atheism, Religion, and the United States Supreme Court.

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Résumé

Since the 1940s, Atheist-Americans have played an important role in re-defining American religion. They have been directly responsible for removing sectarian religious education and prayer from American public schools (*McCullum v. Board of Education* and *Abington v. Schempp*). For changing state laws that once required a person testifying or swearing an oath to also proclaim a belief in God (*Torcaso v. Watkins*). For changing the federal government's definition of 'religious training and belief' so that they might qualify as conscientious objectors (*Welsh v. United States*). And though in recent years they have been unsuccessful in removing 'under God' from the Pledge of Allegiance (*Elk Grove v. Newdow*), ending federal funding for faith-based social programs (*Hein v. Freedom from Religion Foundation*), and eliminating prayers from legislative meetings (*Town of Greece v. Galloway*), even in their failures they have succeeded in initiating a nationwide conversation about the ever-changing relationship between church and state in America. More than that though, these seven Supreme Court decisions offer unique discursive insights into the American Judiciary's curious treatment of Atheism, particularly with respect to the two religion clauses of the First Amendment. And as such, they likewise offer the opportunity to address certain questions pertaining to the role played by Atheist-Americans in the larger discussion of what constitutes American religion, such as: how do these decisions better describe Atheism's place within the complex relationship between church and state; how might they reflect a sense of Constitutional equality between Atheists and religious Americans in general; and how might this equal treatment fundamentally alter the very meaning of American religion itself, when Atheism has been interpreted as both religious, and not? Based on the conclusions of my recently published monograph of the same name, this paper will consider the consequences, as well as benefits, of addressing such inquiries.

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