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The Religion of Atheism
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In December 2008, Tom Morton of Westchester, N.Y., opened a new front in what Bill O'Reilly calls the "War on Christmas."

Tom knew that the town's seasonal display of the Christian nativity scene and the Jewish menorah was legally required to accommodate the seasonal observances of all citizen groups requesting it, so he obtained permission from the town manager to put up a display representing his faith.

As the New York Times described, it was a "humble little sign," with a copper-colored tin in the shape of the sun, and the greeting "American Atheists Wish You a Very Merry Winter Solstice."

Mr. Morton is the president of the New York state chapter of American Atheists, an organization dedicated to the belief that there is no god. His purpose, he told the newspaper, was "to educate his neighbors about the existence of nonbelievers like himself ... he [was] trying only to let the community know that atheists exist."

Since this was not a court case, because the city readily gave permission for Mr. Morton's sign, it established no legal precedent. Still, Mr. Morton accomplished more than the erection of a sign, he demonstrated that atheism is a religion!

By definition, a religion is a group of people who join together because they share a belief about the nature of god or gods, in order to encourage each other in that belief. When we use a definition like this, we usually think of it in terms of religions that believe in at least one god. Islam is a religion because it believes in Allah. Hinduism is a religion because it believes in Krishna, Shiva, Durga, and other gods.

But the definition also applies to religions that believe in no god, such as Zen Buddhism, a religion which sees Emptiness as the Ultimate Reality. Indeed, several other religions lack a belief in an supreme being yet remain classed as religions because their members "share a belief about the nature of god."

Atheism also meets this definition. Like Zen, its members share a belief about the nature of the divine realm, namely, that there isn't one. But this belief remains insufficient to meet the definition, for any individual can believe there is no god, that does not make that person into a religion. A religion must consist of a group of people who hold the same views about god who come together because of that belief. They encourage and support each other to adhere to that belief and to live their lives in a manner consistent with that belief. Just like any other religion.

In other words, what Mr. Morton accomplished by gaining permission to put up his sign was the recognition by the town manager that the people who belonged to the American Atheists were a group, and a religious one at that.

This designation of atheism could have important legal ramifications, for courts have to now treat atheists as secular. If they were reclassified as a religion, that would change their treatment in a court case, such as the 2004 attempt to remove "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. The judge could disallow the challenge because the wording change would actually favor atheism and hence violate the First Amendment's anti-establishment clause.

In other words, rather than the change being understood as a secularizing move, it would become a theologizing move, recasting the Pledge to follow the theological beliefs of the religion of atheism.