



Supreme Court To Decide If Atheism Can Keep Its Monopoly On K-12 Schools

Today the Supreme Court hears a case that could undo a century of decisions that have attacked and undermined religious beliefs by secularizing public education.

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Today the U.S. Supreme Court hears a case that could determine whether parents and taxpayers have any choices about the kind of religion American children are taught with taxpayer funds. *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* concerns whether private donations may support schools that make their religious beliefs explicit. It could also undo a century of U.S. court and legislative decisions that used animus between Protestants and Catholics to attack the faith of both kinds of Christians' children over the last century.

Five years ago, Montana's legislature enacted a tiny school choice program that allows residents to deduct up to \$150 on state taxes for their donations to private school scholarships. Eighteen states [offer](#) similar charitable opportunities, which fund private schools using private money. Montana's taxation agency, however, banned religious schools from accessing these *private* donations, on the grounds that would violate the state constitution's ban on using *public* funds for "sectarian" schools.

Since these school choice programs employ private funds, instead of direct taxpayer support such as through vouchers, they have been less successfully challenged in courts on the grounds Montana's bureaucracy employed. Thirty-seven states [include](#) some variation of this prohibition in their constitutions, and several run programs similar to Montana's, often with courts' approval. Now the Supreme Court will deal with the discrepancy.

It is expected to use the occasion to consider anti-religious constitutional provisions like Montana's, known as [Blaine amendments](#), after the 19th century politician James Blaine. During Blaine's crusade to enact these policies, the word "sectarian" was understood to mean [specifically](#) "Roman Catholic."

That's because it was then the norm, since the American founding, for tax funds to support openly religious schools. In the first three-quarters of the United States' existence, many American schools were directly funded by tax dollars and run by local churches, and sometimes even taught by local ministers (often the most educated person in a town).

So until Supreme Court and legislative changes in the mid-1900s, U.S. public schools [were usually overtly Christian](#): "In the 1800s, the country was predominantly Protestant, and public schools taught a generic Protestantism. Teachers led students in daily prayer, sang religious hymns, extolled Protestant ideals, read from the King James Bible, and taught from anti-Catholic textbooks."

During the height of Catholic immigration to the United States, however, many Protestants didn't want to allow Catholics equal access to local public funding for the schools their churches ran. They thus created barriers to public support for religious schooling, such as Blaine Amendments, that at first affected only Catholics, but eventually also turned on Protestants.

These barriers and others lawmakers and courts added ultimately drove Christianity from publicly supported U.S. K-12 education. They helped lay the legal and cultural groundwork for eventually substituting atheism for Christianity as the religion of U.S. schooling. It's a sneaky move, because atheism and secularism are easier to falsely view as "neutral," when they are in fact a competing religious understanding of the ultimate questions every faith seeks to answer.

The truth is that there is no neutrality about religion. To not believe in God is a religious belief, just as believing in God is a religious belief. To include the Bible in curricula is a religious decision, just like not including the Bible in curricula is a religious decision.

To pray or not to pray: both are religious questions. Both teach something about the importance, existence, and nature of religion, as does every other decision about a school's instruction, teaching methods, and priorities. Instruction techniques must change based on whether one holds the religious view that humans are by nature sinful or the competing religious view that humans are born perfect and corrupted by institutions.

Yet for a century or more, we've accepted the dangerous fiction that it is possible for law and public institutions to be neutral on religious questions. This has had the effect of making secular atheism the dominant religion of American public life, all while pretending it wasn't happening.

On that basis, [in 1962 the Supreme Court held](#) that the U.S. Constitution's requirement that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" required U.S. public schools to ban prayer. In 1962, the [court banned public schools](#) from Bible readings as part of instruction. In 1971, it [banned states from funding nonreligious instruction](#) in private religious schools. In 1985, [it banned schools](#) from allowing one minute for silent prayer or meditation, and in 2000 [banned students](#) from voluntarily leading prayers at football games.

While the Supreme Court repeatedly took a sledgehammer to American Christians' ability to pass on their faith using their own tax dollars and supposedly locally controlled institutions, our politicians have refused to redress the bigotry against religion this entails. For if it is bigotry for Protestants to have banned Roman Catholics from equal access to public education funds solely on account of their religion, it is also bigotry for atheists to have effectively banned Protestants and Catholics from equal access to public education funds solely on account of *their* religion.

Either we all are allowed to educate our children according to our religious beliefs, or some get to impose their religious beliefs on others. There are no two ways about it. There is no such thing as a school that does not teach religion. There is only such a thing as a school that teaches that religion is unimportant, false, foolhardy, a side matter, unrelated to "real life," a private matter, or not worth considering. These are all religious teachings — or antireligious teachings. Whatever you call them, they are not religiously neutral. They are religiously biased.

U.S. public schools impose religious beliefs on children. According to young Americans who have abandoned their family's faith, they did so on average [before leaving high school](#). One of their top reasons for abandoning the faith is the scientism they are taught in their schools. The other top reason are the sexual relativism they are taught in their schools.

The majority of young Americans [believe the point of an education is to be able to buy stuff to make themselves happy](#), which directly contradicts religious teachings that the point of life is to [love God](#) and [serve our neighbors](#). Thanks to *Obergefell v. Hodges*, public schools are now bound to take sides on the deeply religious question of what constitutes a marriage and proper relations between the sexes. Increasingly, [public schools preach](#) identity politics' religious beliefs, such as the idea that sins like racism accrue based on skin color (intersectionalism) and can be solved through collective political action rather than individual repentance.

The Supreme Court has spent a century attacking religion under the guise of neutrality. Its decision on this case could reverse more than a century of injustice that the court has until now pushed apace.

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